

Kirov Saga

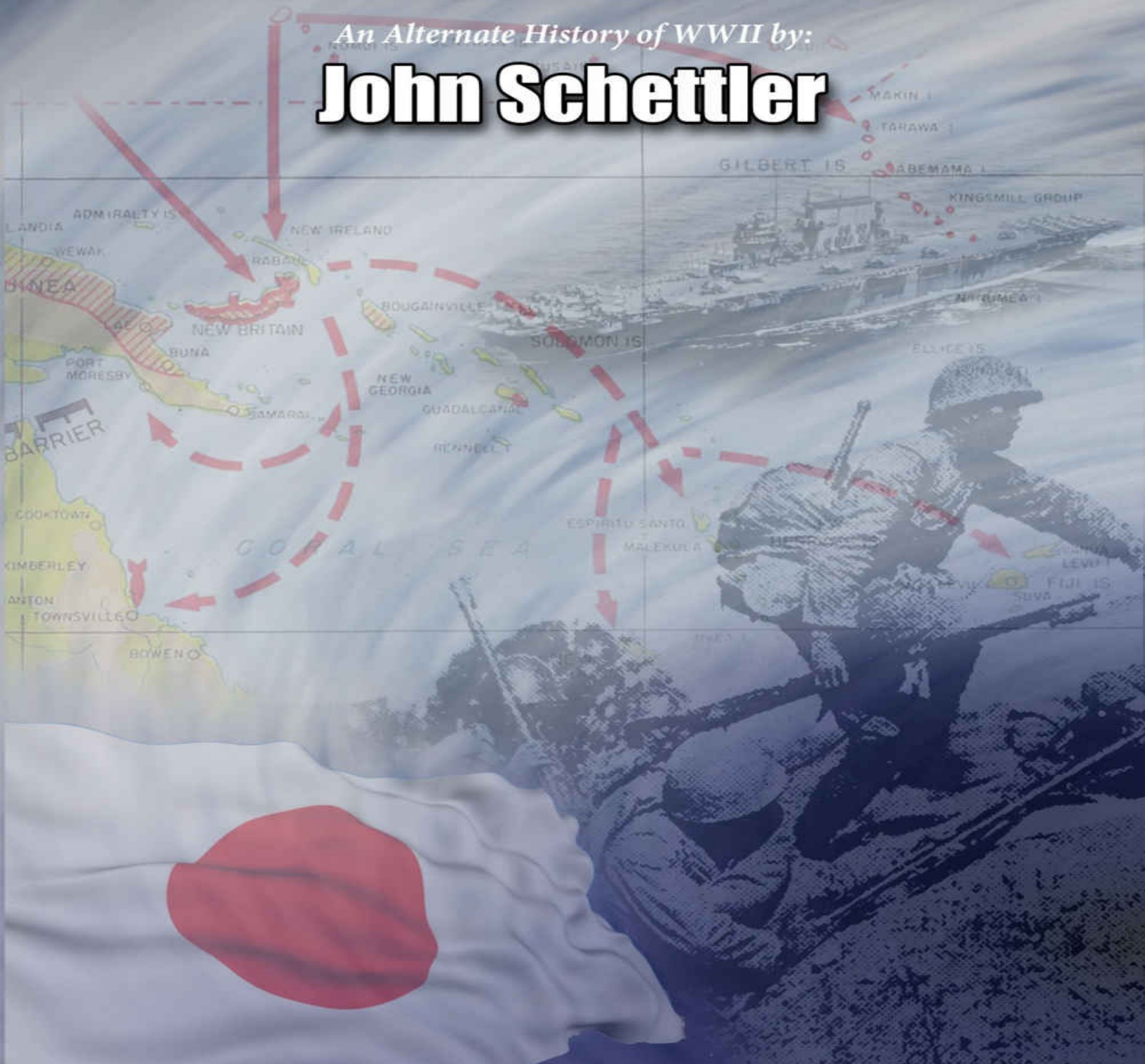


Season 3, Vol 7 in the Kirov Series

Steel Reign

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Steel Reign

By

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

We begin this volume with a visit to an old friend, yes, still out there in the ether somewhere, and *Kirov* also returns to the narrative, which will bring several of the ship's characters into light again. Something is happening at both ends of the strange, attenuated rope that seems to connect the two ships, the one we first steamed into history with, and its doppelganger at large now in the Sea of Okhotsk. How it resolves will be very important.

Meanwhile, we finished *Turning Point* at Hill 498, where Rommel finds once again that he simply cannot prevail in the desert as long as Kinlan's 7th Brigade is on the scene. The first "Battle Book" in the series was released Feb 1st, all 58 chapters of the saga in the desert with Rommel, presenting that entire narrative as extracted from seven series novels in one continuous 500 page file. I hope you like the concept of seeing these major subplots from the series concentrated in a single volume like this. We will have another doing the same for all material in the war on the eastern front, and Sergei Kirov's struggle for survival, and then another for the entire war in the Pacific.

Readers suggested that other major subplots get this treatment too, and one is the long vendetta between the two great villains in the series, Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov. That would capture all the intrigue and fighting for control of Ilanskiy in one continuous narrative, and the great Zeppelin duels between Orenburg and the Siberians. This is material that would not be presented in the East Front Battle book, so look for that soon as my time permits.

In this volume, however, we continue with the thickening clouds of war in the Pacific. The unexpected eruption of Krakatoa brought us DDG-180, and now *Takami* joins the IJN as it embarks on campaigns that take us through the fateful months of April through June, 1942. In Fedorov's history, those months saw the Battles of the Coral Sea and Midway. I present here the equivalent of both those engagements, though they take place as a result of a bold new offensive undertaken by the Japanese—Operation FS.

As he did in *Pacific Storm* (Book III in the series), Yamamoto makes

some very different choices here, largely because of the radical changes that occur due to the fact that the Japanese and France now control the New Hebrides. Rather than operating from Espiritu Santo, Efate and Noumea, the Allies must now operate from Fiji and Samoa. Operation FS (Fiji-Samoa) was a real plan conceived by the Japanese military in our history, which was summarily cancelled after their disaster at Midway. That battle is presented here, while in the north, the ice finally thins enough in the Sea of Okhotsk for one Vladimir Karpov, and his shadow self, to renew his Plan 7 operation. This time Sakhalin Island is the object of his desire, but he soon discovers that there is an unseen challenger at large, a new piece on the board, and *Kirov* finds itself on a collision course with a powerful new adversary.

My thanks to all of you who bought the first Battle Book to support the cause. As you read this, I will launch myself into Book 24, *Second Front*, which will take us from the conclusion of *Steel Reign* and into the later months of 1942. As that title might reveal, it will focus on the plan and operation in the Atlantic to open a second front in a desperate effort to relieve the pressure on Soviet Russia. The action there with Germany's summer offensive will also be presented, operations that capture events akin to Germany's "Operation Blue" and the drive on Stalingrad.

For now, I hope you enjoy *Steel Reign*.

- John Schettler

Part I

Déjà Vu

“Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.”

— Marcel Proust

Chapter 1

The Admiral sat in the quiet of his quarters, a rare and private moment alone, away from the workings of the ship, the burden of command that he had shouldered for so very long. He could never really set it down, he knew, for even now some deep inner sense was hearing the ship, instinctively processing the sounds, knowing the rhythm of it all like a mechanic might listen to a finely tuned engine. He could hear the movement of the crew in the corridors, up and down the ladders, and always there was that feeling of their eyes on him when he stood on the bridge, or passed them in the long narrow halls.

Dobrynin once had his fine tuned ear on the reactors, but Volsky listened to the entire ship, all of it, the sound of the radar systems, the thrum of the turbines turning the screws, the mutter of voices, the movement of heavy booted feet on the metal decks. When it moved, rolling in an unexpected swell, his body instinctively compensated, sea legs tensing and shifting his balance, a reflex born of thousands of hours at sea. The thought that it was all his to govern and manage was sometimes heavy on him, as it was this night, with his heart burned again with loss.

It had been seven hours now, and there had been no further sign of Fedorov. His faithful Navigator had been out on the weather deck, a place the young Captain often went to clear his head, and then, when Rodenko came up to relieve him that morning, he simply could not be found.

There followed the inevitable sequence of events, innocuous reflex at the beginning as Rodenko put out an all points call on the ship's P.A. for the Captain, but it was not returned. Long minutes passed, a distended period that saw two other P.A. calls unanswered. Then it all came to Volsky where he had been walking the lower decks. He had heard the P.A. calls, yet gave them no thought, thinking Fedorov had lost himself in some business or another. Yet as the messages repeated, there came an inner thrum of anxiety that was carried in the silence. Something was wrong. Volsky could feel it, sense it, and he knew it on some deep inner level. Fedorov was not lost in his history books, or wandering in a place below decks where he could not hear the P.A. system. No.

Fedorov was gone.

As soon as Volsky heard the next plaintive call, he knew that to a certainty. “Admiral Volsky, please come to the bridge. This is the Executive Officer...” The hot potato was about to be quietly tossed into the Admiral’s lap, as it inevitably was. They were going to discuss it, initiate an all points search on the ship, circling in place as it had been for endless hours, with the watchmen puckering their eyes from every deck and mast. They might even launch boats to scour the seas around them, though Volsky knew they would not find any sign of the man adrift at sea. It was no good trying to use the helicopter, for that damnable fog remained stolidly impenetrable all around them.

Yes, the minute Volsky heard that first call, he knew Fedorov would never be seen again; his calm and reassuring voice never heard again on the bridge. He was gone, and Volsky knew it with a heaviness akin to grief. He would go up to the bridge, huddling with Rodenko to begin the search. There would be Fedorov’s boots, still stuck in the deck plating near that odd depression, but the man would never fill them again.

“I do not think we will find him,” said Volsky quietly to Rodenko, his voice hushed so none of the other bridge crew might hear him.

“But sir... Where could he be?”

“That is a very good question,” Volsky remembered his words to the XO. “We are still asking it about Mister Orlov, and Mister Tasarov, and Chief Dobrynin, and Director Kamenski, are we not? And God only knows who else is missing, and without a soul aboard remembering they were ever here.”

“But this is different,” said Rodenko. “Fedorov... we all remember him. I spoke with every man on the bridge crew. They all know him. It’s not like the others, Tasarov, Kamenski, Orlov. We haven’t forgotten him. Could he have simply fallen overboard?”

“I very much doubt that,” Volsky remembered how heavy hearted he felt when he said that, knowing Fedorov was gone, missing him already, mourning his loss from the very first report with a quiet inner grief. But Rodenko was correct. This time there was no hazy memory loss concerning the man. It was not like Tasarov, when only one man on the ship could remember he ever existed, his best friend Nikolin. Perhaps it was like that now with Fedorov, he thought. I was very fond of that young man, very close to him. He was at the center of everything that has happened to the ship and

crew all these long months. Perhaps he simply has too much gravity to be easily forgotten.

It had taken them some time, like men shaking off a dream and embracing reality, before they finally remembered the others, Dobrynin, Kamenski, Orlov. Fedorov said something about gophers, and that set everything loose in Volsky's mind. That single thread of memory had rippled with fire, the energy leaping through one synapse after another in his tired brain, and the soft glow of recollection rekindled as it went. Places in his mind that had been stilled, as though misted over with that same heavy fog that now surrounded the ship, were now suddenly awake again, remembering... remembering...

Yet with Fedorov, I knew it from the very first. I could never forget that man, he thought. It was just like that moment when they realized Orlov was gone as well. They had been huddled on the bridge, with Fedorov trying to jog everyone's memories concerning these missing men. He could still hear the Captain's voice....

"My god—might there be more men missing? I was talking with Gagarin in the workshops, and he seemed very troubled, thinking he had a short shift, with a man missing. It was as if his old habits were at odds with the reality around him. I think he was struggling to remember something, just as I was, and Nikolin. Just as you did Admiral."

"Who else?" said Volsky. "Might there be other men missing? What if none of us remembers? We'll have to find a way to go over the entire crew with a fine toothed comb and count our heads."

"Orlov would be the man for that," said Fedorov, fingering the pocket compass the Chief had given him, suddenly remembering the man.

"Orlov?"

Now Fedorov gave the Admiral another cautious look. "Gennadi Orlov," he said. "The Chief. He's the one who found that thing I threw over the side—the Devil's Teardrop...."

"He reached for the dangling intercom handset again, grasping it and raising it to speak. "Chief Orlov, please respond immediately. This is Captain Fedorov."

They waited, each man looking from one to the other, wondering, held in suspense, as if they were waiting at the edge of infinity itself. They had all climbed to this place together, and the rope of their recollection and memory

was still dangling over that precipice, as they waited for the last man to come up.

But he never came. Fedorov repeated the call, but it went unanswered, his voice echoing plaintively through the ship, hollow, forlorn, lost.

Orlov was gone.

And this time it was Fedorov.

Volsky sighed, turning when he heard the soft knock at his cabin door. He knew it was Rodenko, at least he hoped that was the case. He had asked the XO to come to his cabin, and was relieved when the hatch opened and he saw Rodenko's face.

"You wanted to see me, Admiral?"

"Yes, come in, Mister Rodenko. I don't suppose you have any further news concerning Fedorov."

"I'm sorry sir, but we've had no word from the search details."

Volsky nodded heavily. "Are the men still out in the launches?"

"We have three boats out sir, all tethered to the ship by rope, but they've seen nothing in the water."

"And I do not think they will," said Volsky. "Have Nikolin signal them to return to the ship... Assuming we still have a man named Nikolin at communications." He gave Rodenko a searching look.

"Yes sir, Nikolin is still with us."

"Good." Volsky forced a half smile. "Well Mister Rodenko, it seems you are due for a promotion. A ship must have a Captain, and with Fedorov gone, you are next in line, the only other man I can rely on now. We will have to give some thought as to who we will put in your place as Executive Officer. Zolkin is a good man, with a good head on his shoulders, but he does not know ship's operations. Any suggestions?"

"I'll give it some thought sir. Byko might stand in, though he's been very busy of late checking for any further damage to the ship."

"Yes," Volsky nodded. "Byko. He's a steady hand, and just what we may need. He can coordinate his engineering crews from the bridge easily enough. I'll speak with him."

"Very good sir."

Volsky had a vacant expression on his face, and Rodenko knew it well enough. *Toska*, sadness, loss, a melancholy that was too deep for words. It was anguish, heartache, a longing and regret. It was a restless uncertainty,

anxiety, but also a nostalgia that was a cousin to grief, but behind all that there was love, and a quiet hope for better times.

“Mister Rodenko,” said Volsky. “I must tell you that I have felt very odd of late.”

“We all have, sir.”

“No,” said Volsky with a wag of his thick finger. “It is more than this confusing madness that has been plaguing us. It is very strange... I feel... empty.”

“Losing a man like Fedorov will do that to you sir. And we’ve lost so many other good men.”

“Yes, but that is not what I mean. It is as though I was just not all here. I’m forgetful, listless, and very fatigued. The other day I was on my way to the bridge and found myself on the wrong deck.”

“It’s just the whole situation, sir, this fog, the missing men, Lenkov’s legs.”

“It’s more than that. Mister Rodenko, I must tell you that you should not be surprised if I am the man who fails to make his next assigned shift. I feel all thin and stretched... I feel like something is pulling at me, reaching for me, but I cannot see it or understand it. If I should suffer the same fate as our good Mister Fedorov, then realize that all this business will then be on your shoulders. Understand?”

Rodenko sighed, and nodded. He remembered the day his grandfather had spoken to him like this, telling him that he felt old and all used up, with nothing more to do on this earth, and nowhere to go. Three days later he died.

“I will do my best sir,” he said.

“I’m sure you will. The crew is having a difficult time as it stands. My presence here has done some good in holding things together, and Fedorov, god bless the man, was a very great help. If I turn up missing next, things may get very difficult...”

Rodenko nodded. “I understand, sir.”

“Do you? Well, I think you should have a talk with Sergeant Troyak. Should the crew become disturbed, he is another man that can help you pull things together. Use your best judgment when it comes to posting his Marines, but it may come to that in time.”

He heard himself say that, and smiled inwardly... *In time...*

“Sir,” said Rodenko haltingly. “What’s happening to everyone, the men.

Where are they going?”

“Better men than me have tried to answer that question, including Fedorov. I cannot help you any more than they could. Fedorov said it was this Paradox business, the same thing that’s been causing all the other problems around the ship, including Lenkov’s legs. We don’t belong here, Mister Rodenko. That is the simplest way I can put it. Time has no place for us, and so now we pay the price for our meddling.”

“We don’t belong *where*, sir? Are we still in the Atlantic of 1941?”

“We seem to be in the Atlantic, though we have never verified that. If we shifted again, as Fedorov believed we would, then most of the time we stayed right where we were, except for the time difference. There was that one occasion when we moved from the Pacific to the Atlantic, Fedorov said it was like someone picked the ship up, like a toy in a bathtub, and the earth simply turned beneath us. Well, here we are... somewhere. We’ve been circling in place like a restless shark. Fedorov advised it, in the event we sailed right up on land in this heavy fog.”

“It’s been days now sir. Why doesn’t it lift?”

“You’ve been in the doldrums before, Rodenko. These conditions can persist for weeks.”

“Then perhaps we should move on some more definite course. It might take us out of this mess.”

“It might. If you wish to do so, you can choose any heading you desire. I think we can assume we start from our last known position. Yes, let us go then, and see if we can find the stars, or perhaps the moon. That’s what Fedorov might do.”

“Very well sir. Will you be taking your regular bridge rotation, or would you prefer some time to rest? I’m sure Zolkin would have something that might help.”

“Yes, I think I’ll go see the good doctor. He’ll probably want me chained to a cot down in sick bay, so I think I’ll visit the galley first. That’s another thing. The ship will need fresh food and water soon. Put that on your list if we find a good heading. Steer for safe ground so we might put men ashore to take on supplies.”

“I’ll take care of everything sir, don’t worry.”

“And the other officers... See that you have a line of succession well established. Just in case....”

“I will, sir.” Rodenko felt as though Volsky was very worried he would be the next man to vanish. He was running down some mental checklist with him, still tending to all the things that would have to be done to see to the safety of the ship and crew.

“Well,” said Volsky. “How does it feel now, Captain? You’ll be filling Fedorov’s shoes, but not the ones he left stuck in the deck please.”

Rodenko smiled. “I don’t think they’d fit me, sir, and I can only hope I can measure up to the job your handing me.”

“Just use your head,” Volsky pointed. “And sometimes your heart as well. Don’t forget the men, Rodenko. They’ve been through so very much....”

Chapter 2

Orlov sat in the officer's mess, a sour expression on his face. He was Chief of Operations, but now he felt diminished in the hulking shadow of Grilikov. That man was never far from Karpov, a brooding presence always lingering at the edge of the Admiral's business. And that was another thing that bothered him—Admiral Karpov. How did he get so high? Volsky was much easier to get along with than Karpov ever was. The ship put into Murmansk, Karpov disappears for a time, and Volsky never returns. Then word came that the Admiral had died while fighting aboard a British battleship in the Atlantic. Captain Karpov was bad enough, but *Admiral* Karpov was something else altogether.

He kept thinking about that, and the strange way he felt whenever Karpov was near. The man gave him the chills, but Karpov was still just the same little weasel he always had been.

Why should I feel so put off by the man, he thought? Surely not because he posed any physical threat. I'm a full head taller, and if I wanted to I could bust Karpov up any time I wished—Grilikov aside. Yet when Karpov looks at me now, it's as if he was seeing right through me, seeing every little dirty plan and scheme I ever came up with. It's as if he knows what I might do before I even get the notion in my own head, and by god, that man's eyes can freeze your blood.

Why was he so different now, not just the scar on his face, but everything about him? It's as if he wakes each day and puts on his own shadow. There's a darkness about him, a coldness, a ruthless soul, that one. Before, he was always looking to find some angle, or work his way into some favorable position, and with three or four reasons why some other man was to blame for anything that ever went wrong. Now, the thought of competing for a position would never enter his mind. If he wants something, he just takes it—like this goddamn ship!

He was different, truly changed since this revelation that the ship had come through a hole in time. How in hell could that happen, he thought? I've been round and round with Chief Dobrynin about it, but he doesn't know anything. That little shit Fedorov knows something, more than he lets on. I

was supposed to watch him. Karpov explained it all to me in gangland terms. He said he was going to give me a promotion...

"I'm bumping you up to Kassir, the man of authority, the bookmaker, the man who collects from all the Brigadiers. And guess what, you won't be running a small group of six to ten cells, like you might back home in Saint Petersburg with the Grekov Group. No. Beneath you is the entire crew of this ship, and you are Kassir, Chief of the Boat. Understand? The other officers like Rodenko and Samsonov, and even Troyak, well, they are your Brigadiers, and the men beneath them are all Boeviks and Shestyorkas in those Brigades, the warriors, runners, messenger boys, you get the drift. We call them mishman and matocks. Some are torpedo men, missile men, and you know who they are. Others are messenger boys like Nikolin."

"What about Fedorov?"

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

Yes, Fedorov was smart, too smart. He had already worked his way into Karpov's good graces. Now he struts about on the bridge like he was born there—Captain Fedorov—*Starpom* of the whole goddamned ship. So what am I supposed to do with that? I get passed over for a one time Lieutenant Navigator, and now Fedorov lords it over me as *Starpom*. Karpov told me it was all about stars and bars, all in the chain of command. Then he goes and makes Fedorov his goddamned *Starpom*!

Every time he thought about Fedorov, he had a sour feeling. It was as if the man had done something personally to him to offend, though he could not think of what it was, beyond having the temerity to stand up to him that one time in the mess hall.

Karpov says I'm *Kassir*, but what am I supposed to do with that? Karpov says I'm to spy on Fedorov, but he's too damn clever. Now he just whispers in Karpov's ear, and the two of them sit up there on the bridge while I just bounce about below decks and knock heads together on the crew rotations. I should be up on the bridge, in the regular watch rotations there. I should be in on all the little discussions those two have now. Karpov says he came out here to bust up the Japanese, well he should see me about that, not Fedorov.

He mulled and muttered inwardly over that, stirring in some gravy to warm his mashed potatoes. Fedorov and Karpov, like two little peas in a pod now. And that wasn't the worst of it. It was those strange dreams that were plaguing him these days, impossible dreams. He had one the other night again, same as last week. He was up high, falling through the clouds, adrift, and his heart was pounding with fear. He saw the clouds seared by the hot white fingers of missile trails, as if a steely hand was reaching for him, clawing at him, seeking his life.

That was the way it always started, the pulse pounding fear, then that awful sensation of falling. It didn't end that way though. It got better. The longer he fell, the more he experienced a tremendous sensation of freedom. He was not plummeting down to some inescapable doom, but soaring free, alive, and with some newfound purpose. He was leaving the ship behind, out on his own, and yet here, in this world, he knew things that would make him a very rich and powerful man in no time at all.

Soon he was brawling in bars, drinking himself to sleep, rolling hapless derelict passersby on the quays of some big harbor, and taking whatever he wanted. Karpov said a little brawn was necessary at times, and Orlov was quick to agree.

Strange dreams... always the same, falling, falling into the sea, adrift until he found himself on a fishing boat. After that it just got better and better. He would go where he wanted, take what he wanted, and with everything he knew, he would be rich in no time. Then came that strange dream with another nosy Captain ruining his game, this time a barrel chested British officer with a cane he kept tapping on the deck of his antiquated old destroyer. The next thing he knew he was sitting in a dark room, with a single light above, and someone was getting pushy, asking him questions. Yes... Too many questions.

They came every night now, dreams of riding the wide sea in a freighter, then on a much smaller old trawler... Dreams of laughing aloud as he opened up on a submarine with a machinegun. What was that all about? Then he had the weirdest dream of all. It was just the face of a man, choking, eyes bulging red, a look of constricted pain on his face. Orlov realized he had the man by the neck, and he was choking the life out of him, enjoying every last second of the experience, watching his lips turn purple, eyes roll over like a shark, and hearing that last desperate wheezing attempt to save himself. Then it was

over.

That was one hell of a dream, and it had fisted up like a bad storm in his mind three times in the last ten days. He couldn't wait to see if he would dream it again that night. Or maybe he would dream the other wild flight he made, dangling from some massive hulk in the sky above, suspended inside a small steel capsule on a long cable. It was another wild free moment, only this time it ended in that terrible wrenching experience of icy cold fear. The sound... The goddamned sound... the sound you could feel, but not hear... That bright shiny thing he found on the ground when he turned to run for his life....

He kept that dream in his pocket for some time, wondering about it. Then, as if to mock him, it returned to plague his sleep yet again, a strange object, silver bright, perfectly smooth, and in the shape of a metal teardrop, about the size of an egg. It made no sense, but the next thing he dreamt was the swirling of silt and sand, as if driven by a fitful wind. He looked in his hand, saw the object he had found with a strange glow about it. Suddenly it was very hot and he dropped it with a yelp of pain. After that it was Fedorov again, sticking his nose in the situation and demanding the object, whatever it was.

He didn't like that dream, the one where Fedorov appeared and took that thing from him—put it right in his pocket and walked away. Why would he ever let that little shit get away with something like that? What did all this mean?

He shook his head, as if to dispell the recollection of the dreams, but he knew they would bother him again that night. Maybe he'd choke that bastard to death again, or ride that steel capsule, or fall like a fiery angel from the sky into the sea. Then again, maybe he'd hear that sound again, there but not there, deep and chilling, so goddamn unnerving that the only response was to run, run for your sorry ass life. Then he'd awaken into that life, remembering he was safe on the ship again, one sorry ass indeed. He'd get up, forget to shave, grumble on below decks as always, checking the duty rosters. And he'd see Karpov climbing the ladder up to the goddamned bridge, his eyes on him a very long time as he went, sallow, vengeful eyes. What the hell am I doing on this god forsaken ship, he thought? Why do I put up with all this shit?

That night, however, he got quite a shock. He had been sitting in the

officer's mess, thinking about all of this—Karpov, Grilikov, Fedorov, the dreams. Then in walked the fresh little *Starpom* himself! Orlov gave him a sallow grin.

"Look what the bear dug up," he said, the Russian equivalent of 'look what the cat dragged in.'

"Good evening, Chief. How's the fare tonight?"

"Miserable," said Orlov, "just like last night. But you're a senior officer now, eh? You can just go back and ask the chef for specials."

"Well, you're a senior officer as well, Orlov. Is that what you do?"

"I wrangled some gravy, but it didn't help much."

"I see... Mind if I join you?"

Orlov was thinking he had to see what Fedorov was up to tonight, as he had been somewhat remiss, so he simply nodded his head. Maybe he could learn something.

"How's the air up there on the bridge these days," he said with just an edge of resentment.

"Same as always," said Fedorov. "Karpov casts a pretty thick shadow. The man practically lives on the bridge now, and Grilikov gets a permanent post up there too. Samsonov is training him on CIC operations."

"The two of them should get along fairly well." Orlov shrugged, his expression hiding nothing of his sour inner mood.

"Something bothering you tonight, Chief?"

"Tonight, last night, every night." He didn't know why he offered that, but once he had enjoyed talking with Fedorov—before, when he was just the ship's Navigator. He secretly admired the other man's intelligence, even though he could never understand how he could bury his nose in those boring books all the time.

"What do you mean?" asked Fedorov.

"Nothing... Just bad dreams. Probably because of all this lousy food. A man can't sleep with a belly full of cold potatoes. That's what this whole deployment has turned into, eh Fedorov? Cold potatoes."

"It's certainly difficult. You losing sleep over it? What's with these bad dreams?"

Questions... Just like that dream he had from time to time. Dark rooms and questions. Now here was Fedorov asking them this time, like he was Doctor Zolkin, only without any medicine to dispense. He gave the new

Starpom a sour look.

“Tell you what,” he said gruffly. “I was dreaming I was choking the life out of someone the other night. I had these nice big hands on his scrawny little neck and I was watching his eyes bug out. He was asking me too many questions too, just like you. So maybe I’ll dream you into that little nightmare next time it comes around, eh? And where do you get off taking anything from me?”

Even as he said that, Orlov realized it was stupid. It had just popped out, as he had been thinking about that last dream, where Fedorov demanded that silver teardrop, pocketed the damn thing and then just walked away.

“Taking something from you?” Fedorov could sense Orlov’s hostility, and his instinct was to mend fences. “Have I done anything to offend you Chief? I can’t recall ever taking anything of yours.”

“Never mind,” said Orlov. “It was just another dream.”

Strange, thought Fedorov. Orlov is clearly in a bad mood tonight. Dreams are dreams, and I realize he may bear me a good deal of resentment, seeing as though I was promoted to *Starpom* over him. He’s never liked that, but... I did take something from him once, though he couldn’t possibly know about that. Just the same...

“Sorry Chief. I don’t mean to pry into your affairs, but what was it you thought I took from you?”

Orlov leaned back, folding his arms. “Nosy little runt, aren’t you. Want to know what the Chief does in his sleep, do you? You want to get cozy with me now, Fedorov? Well I’ll tell you what. I’ve been dreaming I was off this damn ship, that’s what. Dreamt I jumped so far that none of you would ever see me again. Found bars, beer, babushkas, and better food. And when someone got nosy with me I choked the breath right out of him. You want to get nosy with me now?”

“Alright...” Fedorov held up a hand. “Like I say, I don’t mean to offend. Just making conversation, that’s all. Maybe I’ll have better luck with the cold potatoes.” He stood up, taking his plate and intending to go to the buffet that had been set out tonight. Yet even as he did so, the things the Chief had just said to him struck an odd chord in his mind. That was what Orlov had done—jumped ship, and from his old story, he had quite a time in the bars and brothels of Spain thereafter. Orlov said I took something from him....

A sudden memory returned to him now, of those first strange moments

after the ship last vanished in the Atlantic. Orlov had been below decks seeing to the work crews, which were scouring the ship to see if any further damage had been sustained.

“Chief on the bridge!” came the boatswain’s call, and Orlov huffed through the side hatch in a grumpy mood. “Top to bottom,” he said gruffly. “The men are going over the whole damn ship!”

“I trust you are well, Chief,” said Volsky.

“Not bad,” said Orlov. “But we found another stair missing on the lower engineering level. They had to rig a ladder there. Damn thing was half there, three steps, the rest gone. What’s going on around here, Fedorov?” Even Orlov turned to the ex-navigator for answers now, but Fedorov could only speculate.

“We’re shifting, yet in an uncontrolled state,” said Fedorov. “Remember my example with magnetism? The ship may have acquired some kind of phantom energy throughout its travels. It may be causing these effects. How were the final mast inspections, Chief?”

“Everything seems to be working on the main masts and radar decks. The Tin Man optical units checked out fine too. An Engineering team is on the way to fix that mess.” He thumbed the main bridge hatch. “Speaking of magnetism, there’s just one other thing gone haywire.” He smiled, handing Fedorov his pocket compass.

Fedorov took it, and to his amazement, the needle was completely lost. It spun left and right, then twirled about, unable to find magnetic north, a useless flutter, no matter which way he held it.

“Keep it,” said Orlov. “It’s no good to me.” He tramped over to the coffee station near the plotting table, and looked for a mug. “Who knows,” he said. “Maybe the coffee will taste better for a while.”

...Half way to the buffet, Fedorov stopped, an odd impulse sending his hand into his jacket pocket. His heart leapt as his fingers settled on a small object, and he slowly drew it out.

It was Orlov’s compass!

Chapter 3

How could it be here? That was the first question burning in Fedorov's mind. Orlov gave this to me on the other ship, the ship I still remember with complete clarity. Yet this is more than a memory, it's a physical object, and I clearly remember that moment when Orlov handed it to me. In fact, he disappeared shortly after that, which is why I was so surprised when I first encountered him here on this ship.

It was a remnant of that other life, he thought, just like that bandage Doctor Zolkin discovered down in sick bay, and the data on his computer with the names of the missing crew—just like that magazine Karpov found, the one we recovered from that island off the northern coast of Australia. My god... that seems so long ago now, and we were just about to enter the Pacific at that time. All these things were odd remnants from the life I experienced before. Yet how could they be here, on this ship?

Now he remembered the strange documents Alan Turing had found in the archive of Bletchley Park. They were detailed accounts of experiences from that other life, that other meridian of time we were sailing on before we shifted and manifested here in June of 1940. But this isn't the same ship. It doesn't make any sense. How could these things exist here?

A sudden thought occurred to him. If Orlov gave me this compass once before, might he have a similar one now? He hesitated briefly, seeing the Chief's surly mood, but decided to ask anyway.

"Chief," he said. "Were you in the habit of using a pocket compass?"

"What?" Orlov gave him a blank look. "Pocket compass? I suppose I have one somewhere. What's the matter, Fedorov? You lost all of a sudden, or do you just miss your post at navigation?" He gave him a wry grin.

"Once a navigator, you always have your nose in the charts. Yeah, I'm missing my compass. If you're not needing yours..."

"I'll look for it." Orlov said nothing more, getting up and bussing his tray over to the dirty dish counter.

Fedorov was very confused about all of this as he slowly made his way back to the buffet. The boundaries between these two meridians of time seemed strangely permeable. Admiral Tovey has been right at the edge of

recollection from that first encounter we had with him after we shifted here. Now Zolkin seems to be struggling with memories from those earlier experiences. I wonder if Orlov is too.

“Say Chief,” he said tentatively. “This may sound odd, but do you ever get the feeling that we’ve done this before?”

“You mean that slop they’ve been serving at the buffet the last three days?”

Fedorov smiled. “No, not the food. I mean this whole situation—the ship, this incredible shift in time. Ever have what they call *déjà vu*?”

“What’s that, some kind of French cologne?”

“No, no. It’s a feeling that comes where you think you’ve already lived through some present moment before—maybe like you’re stuck in some kind of loop or something, and you keep going over and over events of the past, reliving them.”

Orlov looked over his shoulder, giving Fedorov a nod. “Maybe I know this. You mean like a dream—like those nice little nightmares I told you about?”

“Something like that, only it tends to happen while you’re awake. You walk into a room, and you suddenly think to yourself—I’ve been here before, done all this before.”

Orlov grinned again. “Yes, every time I go to take a shit.”

“Seriously. Ever get odd feelings like that—things repeating, odd memories returning over and over?”

“Well... Like I told you, I see things in my sleep—dreams—and yes, they repeat over and over. What of it?”

“What kind of dreams? What is it that repeats? You said you were choking someone?”

“You some kind of shrink now? What is it with you, Fedorov? Alright, I have this nice little dream where I’m choking someone to death. I can see his face, but for the life of me, I can’t remember who he is.”

“Are you sure?” Now a memory returned to Fedorov, a conversation he had with Orlov in this very room, just shortly after the ship appeared in June of 1940. He had been reading one of the history books Sergei Kirov had given to him, trying to get a grasp on all that had changed. A weariness overcame him, and the tea he was drinking was not helping. He was just about to finish up and get some sleep when Orlov happened along....

“What are you doing, Fedorov? Nose in the books again? You should have been promoted to the ship’s librarian.” Orlov said that with a grin, realizing, after all, that he was speaking to the ship’s Captain now, and remembering the humiliating lesson Troyak had taught him about showing due respect when he had been busted to the Marine detachment. He had come to the officer’s dining hall for a cup of coffee before going on duty, and found Fedorov sitting at a table reading.

“The world has changed, Orlov,” said Fedorov. “I did not realize just how much has gone awry.”

“I know you are wanting to blame me for that, yes?”

“What? No Chief. I think I got to you in time, or at least those British commandos did. Besides, most anything you may have changed would have had to occur after 1942. The altered state of affairs I am reading about now all happened well before that. I think it was Karpov who had a great deal to do with some of the changes, and I must also confess that I am equally to blame.”

“You, Fedorov? What did you do?”

Fedorov confessed his crime, that errant whisper, and he told Orlov that it ended up resulting in the death of Joseph Stalin himself.

“My god!” Orlov exclaimed. “Here I was worried a bit about choking Commissar Molla, and you took a contract out on Stalin!” As always, Orlov interpreted the events in light of his own life experience, running with the Russian mob for so many years before he had joined the navy had left him very jaded.

“So you see, Orlov, you can sleep easy now. I’m the real culprit.”

“And that bastard Karpov. He sleeps easy too—with the fishes!” Orlov grinned again.

“Yes, I suppose so. In fact, as to that Commissar you speak of, remember, in this world now it is only 1940, so he may still be alive out there somewhere, though if he is, he will be working for Volkov, and not the Bolsheviks.”

At that Orlov’s face and mood darkened. “Still alive? But I killed him.”

“In 1942, but that world, those events that saw you make your way to the Caucasus... well, they might never occur. This is a new world, Chief. Another life altogether, for you, and I suppose for Commissar Molla as well.”

“Sookin syn!” Orlov swore, clearly unhappy with what he was learning

now.

“Orlov... That man you say you dream about. Can you remember anything about how he looks? I mean, did he have a uniform? Was he in the service?”

Orlov’s eyes narrowed. “Come to think of it.... Yes... He had on some kind of military cap, with a red star.”

“Navy?”

“No... Not Navy. But it was just a goddamned dream, Fedorov.”

Now Fedorov decided to take a leap here, and asked Orlov something he didn’t expect.

“Chief... Ever hear of a man named Molla? A Russian Commissar.”

That hit Orlov like a bucket of cold water. He turned, a look of confused surprise on his face. *Commissar Molla*. Yes, he had heard that name before. He knew the man... But how? Where? That was the face in his dream, Molla’s hound dog face wrenched with pain. Something seemed to snap in his mind, like a window breaking in a storm, and a flood of memory rushed in like cold wind. *Commissar Molla!*

“*Sookin syn!* The bastard thought he would have his way with the women, rounding them up like cattle. Well he picked up more than he knew. Bothered my grandmother, that sick, demented son-of-a-bitch. Then he started asking questions—put that pistol of his right in my face.” Then the memories came in a great torrent. It all came back to him, with crystalline clarity, icy cold, and chilling to the bone. He remembered it all....

Orlov heard the footsteps in the hall, and smiled inwardly. At last, he thought. The Commissar was finally here. Once inside the prison they had taken his overcoat, cap and service jacket, just as he expected, and they were hanging on the coat rack in the corner, objects of curiosity or evidence to be fodder for the interrogation that was coming next. Orlov was suddenly reminded of that first session with Loban under the Rock of Gibraltar. He wondered if this Molla would get curious and meet Svetlana the way Loban had?

The door opened and a man stepped in, medium build, and dressed in a plain NKVD uniform with side pistol holstered and two thin leather straps crossed on his chest. Right over the place where the man’s heart was missing,

thought Orlov. Yet as nondescript as his dress was, the man's face and eyes were quite revealing. He was much younger than Orlov had expected him to be, and there was a cold, arrogant air about him, the character of a young man who had come into too much authority and power before he had lived enough to know how to use it. His eyes seemed to squint as he looked Orlov over, narrowed slits with obsidian ice behind them.

The Commissar walked to his desk, his footfalls loud on the old wood floor, but he did not sit down. He stood, regarding Orlov with those cold black eyes, one hand on his left hip. Then he calmly drew his pistol, raising it to the level of his cheek to take aim square at Orlov's head.

"Name." Molla's voice was flat and terse, edged with impatience.

"Orlov."

"Where did you get that uniform?"

Orlov looked at him, a glow of defiance on his cheeks as he sized up the situation. He needed to get the man closer to him.

"I took it from a dead man. He had little use for it, and I thought it would get me to my destination a little easier."

"Dead man? You killed this man?"

"Of course," Orlov returned quickly. "I don't think he would have given me his uniform otherwise."

"You killed an NKVD Officer?" Molla's voice was loaded with recrimination now, the slits of his eyes more pronounced.

"Yes, I killed him. He insisted on taking me to Novorossiysk, and I did not wish to go there."

Molla's hand never wavered as he held the pistol, and now he slowly moved his finger tight on the trigger. It was a Nagant M1895, an old, reliable revolver dating back to the days of the last Tsar. Orlov could clearly see the bullet laden cylinder, and knew a round was chambered and ready to fire with one squeeze of Molla's finger, but he was heedless of the danger. All he could think of was getting Molla closer.

"They say you claimed to have orders for me?"

"That was a lie."

"Of course it was. No one gives me orders here, except perhaps Beria, and he is not around at the moment."

"Lucky for us both," said Orlov with a shrug.

Molla sensed something in the man, a strange kinship that was evident in

his devil may care attitude. He was holding a pistol on the man, and yet he did not think the frank and direct answers he was receiving were born of fear. Most men would be clearly intimidated, eyes averted, with that pathetic pleading look as they struggled to find a way to prove their innocence. But not this man. No. He's unlike any man we've hauled in for a good long while now. This one is a fallen angel, just like me, dark seraphim, bound for hell and determined to start the fires now while he lives. It's as if he thought he was invulnerable!

"Just where did you think you were going, Orlov? What were you doing at Kizlyar? Are you a German sympathizer? A Spy? Were you trying to get through our lines to get to those pigs?"

"Of course not," said Orlov hotly. "I'm Russian! I was looking for the pigs on *this* side of the wire, men who roust women and children out of their homes and truck them off to places like this in the night. Men like *you*, Commissar."

Molla stepped closer, his hand tight on the revolver again. He had killed a hundred men for far less cause than this man just gave him; interrogated thousands more with seared and severed flesh. He was brash, young, and full of himself, and now he had a strong sense that the man he had before him was of the same dark order, a demon of a man who could kill without remorse, without conscience. These were the most dangerous men in the world, he thought. I could use a man like this... if I could control him. Then his righteous anger flared, as he realized just what the man had said to him. Bound for hell or not, we still keep order.

"You stinking piece of shit!" Molla swore at Orlov now. "Tell me... Which eye should I put the first bullet through?" He raised his pistol again, pointing it right at Orlov's forehead.

"Tell *me*," Orlov said darkly, looking him square in those icy black eyes. "How long can you breathe when I get both hands around your neck?"

It was very difficult to speak while you were choking, and that was what was happening to Molla now as he listened to Orlov's last taunting rebuke.

The big Russian had moved so quickly that the Commissar could not even squeeze the trigger of his pistol! In an instant Orlov batted the weapon aside with a sweep of his arm and had a murderous hold on the other man's neck, forcing him back on the desk where he had been sitting and tightening his big hands on the man's throat. Molla's pallid cheeks quickly reddened as he

strained for breath....

“My God! Fedorov....” Orlov gave him a look of profound amazement. Molla! Yes, I know the man. I hunted the bastard down—choked the life out of him for what he did. Then, the next thing I remember I’m on some kind of....” He hesitated, as if struggling to recall something, the memory right at the edge of his mind, yet wreathed in shadow. “You came back for me!” The Chief pointed a thick finger at Fedorov, a look approaching anguish on his face.

Fedorov was watching him very closely, a light of excited awareness in his eyes. Orlov remembered! He was aware of experiences he lived through after he jumped ship. *He knows!*

Part II

Grim Realizations

“Tonight we shall sup with Pluto...”

— **King Leonidas**, *on the eve of Thermopylae*

Chapter 4

Kapitan Falkenrath and the *Goeben* steered south until they were certain they had evaded their enemies, then slowed to 12 knots. On the night of the 27th of February, he turned east, intending to creep silently towards the coast of Africa again, which he approached on the fateful morning of the 28th. He had a sense that something was amiss, a strange quavering in the air that day, and an unaccountable disturbance that he could not put his finger on. It was the initial eruption of Krakatoa, and though he was much too far away to hear it, the shock wave that shook the atmosphere was something perceptible to all the men on the ship. One thought he felt an odd vibration, another was strangely seasick, thinking it no more than a bad bit of beef at breakfast.

Now the ship turned northeast, following the coast up toward the German airfield at El Aioun, which promised to have air support up to cover his approach. In the meantime, Captain Sanders had searched fruitlessly to the north and west, until he ran up close to the island of El Hierro in the Canary's. His quarry had eluded him, and Tovey ordered his cruisers to return to the Azores to have a look at the damage put on *Sir Lancelot* by Hans Rudel's dramatic attack.

As for Rudel himself, he turned and headed for the African coast, even though he knew he would not have the fuel. What he wanted to find now was a U-boat, for if he had to ditch in the sea, that was his only chance at being rescued. With the weather bad, his chances were slim. A lot of U-boat Kapitan's would submerge to avoid the pounding heavy seas could deliver to their boats. So Rudel knew his best chance was to find clear skies, and luck was with him that day. He broke out of the worst of the storm, continued east, and found a nice wide glistening patch of open sea.

If anyone was in the vicinity, this would be a perfect place to surface and take on fresh air after the storm, and that was what Kapitan Karl-Friedrich Merten was doing that hour. Rudel spotted the U-boat, and made a slow approach, but he knew he had to get them on the radio before they saw him. He managed to do that just as the top watch spotted his plane, and was reporting the alarm to the Kapitan.

"Aircraft spotted sir! Coming in low from the west."

His first Officer, Oberleutnant Albert Lauzemis, made ready to order the dive, but Merten stopped him. "It's one of ours," he said, and sent 2nd Warrant Officer Werner Happe up with a team of divers to see about fishing the pilot out of the sea.

Rudel overflew the U-boat, his wings wagging in greeting. Then he flew a slow, lazy circle before he opened his canopy and bailed out, landing very near the u-boat, his parachute a wet deflated jellyfish on the sea. The divers got to him in a small inflatable rubber boat, and he would live to fight another day.

"What in the world are you doing out this far?" asked Merten.

"Hunting the British," said Rudel. "What else?" He told them his story, and all the men listening were quite impressed.

"Well," said Merten. "You can hunt with us for a while if you like. Our mission is to interdict the waters in the approach to Lagos further south." Rudel was going on his first, and last, U-boat patrol, but a signal was sent to Group West informing them of the rescue operation.

Marco Ritter had been very glum for a few days after he made landfall, thinking Rudel had met his fate in those stormy seas. He eventually transferred to the *Prinz Heinrich*, operating east of Lanzarote, and that was where he heard the news.

"They found your protégé," said the Kapitan. "U-68 picked him up and he'll be on patrol with them for some time. But he gets a nice free ride all the way back to Lorient, assuming that U-boat makes it safely home."

Ritter smiled. "Don't worry about that, Kapitan. With Hans Rudel aboard, that boat is charmed. They'll make it home."

And they did....

The *Goeben* made it safely to the German controlled coast as well, and Falkenrath took it quietly north to Casablanca, arriving with barely enough fuel to keep his screws turning. He was very pleased to see the *Kaiser Wilhelm* anchored in the port, and they also had news that Detmers on the *Kormoran* was still at sea, undiscovered, but making steady progress north.

Now the Germans had two of the three great prizes they had obtained in the deep South Atlantic, and days later Admiral Raeder sat down to his dinner with Kapitan Heinrich, soon to learn the world was not what he thought it was.

* * *

Raeder was quite surprised to see the material Heinrich had in that brief, reports, charts, logbooks from an American ship, the *USS Norton Sound*. He would make a point of looking it up, and if it was not found in the index of known enemy warships, he would ask Naval Intelligence to look deeper. What was odd about the material were the dates.

"These can't be accurate," he began, even as Detmers had initially dismissed the possibility that the information could be authentic. Heinrich did not argue the matter. Instead he merely placed more and more material on the table, like a man revealing one piece of some elaborate puzzle after another. As time passed, and Raeder continued to study the documents, he saw how completely consistent every page was, every report and chart.

"1958?" he said with a wry grin. "Someone has a ripe sense of humor."

"That is what I first thought," said Heinrich, "but the documents were all stored where one might expect them, Chart Room, Log Station, Captain's Ready Room. If it was all theater, it was certainly an elaborate performance. There were no other documents but these on that ship. Nothing 'normal' to offset the sheer weight of all this material, which is entirely consistent in depicting the date and time of the events described as occurring in 1958."

"I could have a clerk type up more of the same in half an hour." Raeder was not yet convinced, preferring to conclude this was some Allied special operations ruse. But there was more to the story Heinrich was telling him now. "You say you fired on this aircraft carrier."

"We did, and Schirmer could not miss at that range."

"Then you hit it?"

"I saw the hit with my own eyes, and the fires we started. Then... something very strange happened. I thought it was Saint Elmo's fire at first, all around the ship." He could see it all so clearly in his mind's eye. The strange lights in the heavens seemed to descend and surround the ship, finally collapsing inward to a scintillation of jade green phosphor, and then fleeing into the night. Yet his greatest surprise was in finding that the target of Schirmer's guns had vanished. He could still hear the echo of the ship's guns, a quavering, hollow sound that seemed as though it was being stretched thin.

"Then it was gone," he said. "The carrier was not there any longer."

"Blown up?" asked Raeder.

“I hardly think that possible. The hit was good, but not enough to sink a ship of that size in one blow. Besides that, we would have heard any explosion powerful enough to sink it, and all I heard was the report of our own guns. Furthermore, there was nothing whatsoever on the water. Suddenly the seas were completely calm. It was... Most disturbing.”

“Your first Officer corroborates this?”

“He was standing right beside me. Then, seconds later, the watchmen spotted another ship.”

“The ship you boarded—this USS *Norton Sound*?”

“That is correct, Admiral. And what you see now before you was taken from that ship, along with the rocket we delivered, and all the other equipment, including the radar sets. There is a second missile on the *Goeben*, and Detmers has the ship itself, underway with a prize crew aboard. These are facts that simply cannot be dismissed.”

Raeder shook his head, a perplexed expression on his face. “But why litter such a ship with these false documents? And what would a ship like this be doing out there without any crew aboard? This is a real mystery, Heinrich.”

“Indeed it is, sir. Now kindly have a look at this... I hope your English is good enough to read it.” He reached in to produce the Life Magazine, again dated October 13, 1958, which he pointed out to Raeder immediately. Then he opened it to the article on Montgomery.

“What’s this?” said Raeder. “Montgomery?” he leaned forward, studying the cover photograph closely. “I did not know he was quite so old.”

“I know it will seem impossible,” said Heinrich, but that is supposed to be a photograph of the General as he appears in 1958. Look at the article, it all speaks to his great accomplishments in the desert war against Rommel.”

“Our comedian at work again?”

“Possibly, yet I will tell you that the longer you sit with that, the more disturbed you will become. It was one of several such magazines we recovered, and this next one is quite revealing. We found it in a sea locker below decks. Apparently someone kept it as a memento.”

He produced yet another copy of that same magazine, only this edition was much earlier, but still impossibly dated, October 29, 1945, and this time priced at 10 Cents. Its cover showed a black and white photograph of a man out hunting with his dog and shotgun in the woods, with the subtext “AUTUMN.” Heinrich quickly flipped to the relevant article, a two page

spread with many photos, and the headline struck Raeder like a cold slap in the face: “Allies Indict 24 Top Nazis For War Crimes – Hitler’s aides are mugged like common criminals before trial by Allied Military Tribunal of Big Four.”

There, spread out over the whole two pages, were pictures worth thousands of words, faces, shown dead on and in profile, of all 24 men. They were faces Raeder knew well, names that were now riveted in the highest echelons of the Nazi power structure. There was Reichmarschall Hermann Goring, Joachim von Ribbentrop, General Albert Kesselring, only this time without the smile on his face that was his trademark. Every face seemed harried, lost, deflated, the eyes vacantly staring at the inevitable fate that had befallen them. It was astounding, photos of Franz von Pappen, Generals Wilhelm Keitel, and Alfred Jodl, and there, last of all in the lower right hand corner of page 39, was a man he had spoken to only two days ago, Admiral Karl Döenitz.

“Commander in Chief of the German Navy? Why, they’ve given Döenitz my title! And this is accusing him of crimes against persons and property on the high seas. Well that is certainly true, if they also want to convict themselves of that same offense.”

“May I, Admiral?” Heinrich took up the magazine and began reading... ‘Less than six months after the end of the war against Germany, the victorious Allies made the first move to punish the leaders of the defeated Axis. In the white-walled chamber of Berlin’s People’s Court, an indictment against 24 top members of the Nazi hierarchy was presented before the International Military Tribunal. All 24 were charged with participating in a common conspiracy to commit crimes against the peace by using the German State as an instrument of war....’ Look at them sir, accused of crimes against humanity; lined up like common criminals.”

Raeder smiled. “That is not too far from the truth.” The Admirals disdain for the Nazi mentality was well known. Heinrich handed the magazine back to him, and Raeder continued reading further. “We must make it clear to the Germans that the wrong for which their fallen leaders are on trial is not that they lost the war, but that they started it.” He turned the page. “Yes, we certainly did. Where could they have possibly obtained all these photographs? My God, look at the expression on that face.” He pointed to Döenitz. “I wonder why they left me out of this little club?”

“Who can say, sir?”

“Why would they concoct something like this?”

“Is it a concoction Admiral? A Fabrication? That is certainly the question. Turn the page—there’s much more.”

Now Raeder stared at a large full page photo of men on cots, spread out, as the article caption claimed, on the hanger deck of the carrier *Enterprise*. The title was: “*The Long Voyage Home—Having won its war in the Pacific, the Navy returns to have its day.*” There followed photos of US Navy sailors arriving in Panama, and a dancing girl entertaining a group of enthusiastic seamen in their dress whites. The following page showed an eerily authentic looking photo captioned: “*The U.S.S. Enterprise, sunk six times according to Jap claims, enters New York Harbor by the dawn’s early light.*”

Kapitan Heinrich could see just the hint of discomfiture in the Admiral’s eyes now. “Every page of this magazine is consistent in its depiction of the time as 1945—just like this other magazine dated to 1958. The message they both convey is quite obvious: from the perspective of those years, this war has ended, and Germany was utterly defeated, our leaders trotted into a courtroom and tried for war crimes. I first entertained the thought that this was all propaganda, but here we find a ship that I believe you will not locate in the registry of American vessels, and with rockets pulled from its hold like teeth from a shark, and all the other equipment—advanced radars, radios, other equipment that we do not yet understand. I suspect, Admiral, that upon closer inspection, we will find this equipment is much advanced. We even noticed serial numbers dated to 1952 or later. Certainly we have nothing to match these rockets now. Yes, as preposterous as all that seems, read further. It leaves you with a terrible yawning doubt, page after page...”

Raeder flipped through the pages. Even the silly advertisements all conspired to speak the same message. One for the New York Central Train Line spoke of how ‘wartime travelers made post-war travel news.’ Another from a baby food company was showing an infant born in ‘The Year of Victory.’ Swift & Company proclaimed: ‘Final, complete victory has, of course, hastened the day when there will be plenty of meat for everyone.’

Raeder would find a most interesting article a few pages on: ‘The Atomic Scientists Speak Up – Nuclear Physicists say there is no secrecy in Atomic Bomb and no defense against it.’ He knew something of that, but said nothing. There was even an article with photographs near the end that

featured the broken and bomb damaged statues of Berlin, which gave Raeder a shudder.

“Heinrich... You are suggesting that these documents and magazines may be authentic? Why, they would have to have come from...”

Heinrich did not finish the Admiral’s sentence, it simply wasn’t necessary. The photographs spoke their silent truth. Raeder took up the issue dated October of 1958. There, in the table of contents, was Montgomery’s portrait, led by a haunting quote from the English poet T.S. Eliot: “*Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future...*”

It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter 5

He joined the *Verein für Raumschiffahrt*, a society for space travel, at the ripe age of 17, to begin his first foray into rocket design in 1927. There he met Max Valier, who saw applications for rocketry in driving cars, trains, gliders and even snow sleds. By 1930, select members of the society had co-opted an abandoned ammo dump near Reinickendorf and saw it the perfect place to begin testing their designs. They called it the *Raketenflugplatz*, or Rocket Airfield, and their first major test model was called the Mirak-1, which used a mix of a liquid oxygen and gasoline. After one successful test, the second model exploded, sending the team back to the drawing board to consider a less volatile method of fuel.

Early variants designed by the group produced modest results, achieving altitudes of 200 feet and ranging no more than a kilometer. Eventually the altitude reached one mile, which was when the Army stepped in when the group approached it looking for funding and support. With an Army proving ground site available at Kummersdorf, the young Wernher Von Braun soon found himself working for the Army. There he met the famous Major von Richthofen and Ernst Heinkel, who wanted him to work on designs for rocket assisted aircraft.

Von Braun also helped developed the A-Series rockets, (A-1 and A-2) which he nicknamed Max and Moritz. It wasn't until 1937 that a dedicated testing site was set up at a top secret underground location called Peenemünde on the Baltic coast. It started with the A-3 design improving on earlier models, but had little real support until a strange ship appeared and began flinging lethal rocket weapons at German Navy ships. Suddenly Hitler was all ears. He wanted to know everything possible about these rockets, how they worked, how they were guided to their targets, how far they could fly and what payload they might carry.

Soon von Braun found himself leading a team of very talented scientists, among them designer Walter Reidel, Rudolph Hermann conducting wind tunnel testing, Dr. Mader in materials, Dr. Ernst Steinhoff working on guidance and telemetry, Arthur Rudolph in the fabrication lab, Klaus Riedel conducting testing, and Hermann Steuding handling aeroballistics. Their

designs were many: the *Wasserfall* and *Schmetterling*, The Waterfall and Butterfly, remote controlled AA rockets, Germany's first attempts at building a functional SAM. The *Taifun* followed, conceived as a weapon that could be fired in massive waves against high flying Allied bombers.

These and other designs got support from Goring, who was also looking for an anti-aircraft rocket for the Luftwaffe, but Germany never really saw a development path leading to much success with them... until two mysterious rolling chassis were delivered to Peenemünde on the night of May 5, 1942. Von Braun was among the first to get a look at them, his eyes widened with delight and awe when he saw them.

"We'll name them Max and Moritz," he said with a grin, hearkening back to those early days of testing. They would become schoolmasters for the well educated minds who were now there to study them, and one day they would be twin terrors for the Allied cause. There, sitting on those horizontal carriages, were solutions to all the problems they had been muddling through. They had samples of materials, and engine design, for the X-17A was using three different engines made by Morton-Thiokol. They had the solid fuel propellant used in each engine, something that was not achieved in Fedorov's history until 1948, and most of all, they had the design, noting the presence of two small rockets on the first stage that had been added to impart a desired spin on launch.

Beyond that, they had something in the nose of each missile that was truly perplexing—two fully functioning low yield atomic warheads. It would be many months before they could even begin to grasp the full magnitude of what they had before them, but in that time, the examples would serve to guide and instruct the entire German rocket program. The only dilemma von Braun and his cohorts faced was the fact that they could not see the missile actually fire without losing it forever. They could only probe, measure, analyze and speculate, and so their first effort would be to try and reverse engineer what they had in front of them by building their own models. To adequately achieve the same scale, they would need to first understand how the powerful solid fuel propellant was made.

Up until that time, most German rocket models had used volatile liquid fuel combinations of oxygen and alcohol, but this was something entirely different. By removing tiny samples for analysis, they determined that the oxidizer here was being embedded in a rubbery matrix that was cast right into

the motor design as an integral part, much unlike a liquid fueled rocket that could be fueled on the launch pad. A solid propellant also produced a steady burn, which was much more difficult to throttle than a liquid fueled system, where the thrust could be determined by the amount of fuel being injected into the combustion chamber.

The German scientists quickly realized that once this rocket was ignited, it could not be shut down, which even prohibited a test firing of the engine to determine its thrust and characteristics. Once it was fired, it was lost forever as a working model.

‘Yet solid fuel has many advantages,’ said von Braun, ‘particularly from a military standpoint. It is very dense, allowing us to get a lot of thrust from a very low volume of material, and that saves weight. It ignites immediately, requiring no pre-fueling operation prior to launch, which would be completely impractical on a ship. And my experience tells me the reliability of such fuel will be much better than liquid fuel, and the shelf life is indefinite. From a logistical standpoint, it is much to be desired in a rocket weapon for military use—no fuel trucks and supporting crews, quick deployment and firing, easy transportability.’

‘But is this the weapon that struck our ships?’ asked designer Walter Reidel. ‘Look, it clearly has three stages, the largest being that wider first stage. We have estimated the burn time on the volume of propellant there to be about two minutes. The other two stages, being much smaller and narrower in diameter, might burn for just a few seconds. From my perspective, I would say this design was intended to achieve very high altitudes, and very quickly if the first stage burns so fast.’

‘Perhaps it is not the ship killer,’ said Rudolph Hermann. ‘We are working on an exact model of the three stages for wind tunnel testing soon. This may be the anti-aircraft model—that is my suspicion.’

‘The key will be to first replicate the solid fuel propellant,’ said von Braun.

‘We are only just beginning to understand its component chemistry,’ said Dr. Mader. ‘We have identified acrylic acid, ammonium and potassium nitrates, perchlorates. The fuel is actually in granular form, embedded in a kind of rubber like asphalt, and these grains have a very specific shape to maximize burning characteristics.’

On and on it went, until the actual warhead itself became a central focus

of German interest. They did not know exactly what they were looking at in the beginning. Every preconception they had would lead them in the wrong direction. When they actually removed it to make a closer inspection, they were stunned to see there appeared to be no explosive material there at all, no amatol, TNT, or anything else. What good was a rocket with no explosive warhead?

It was then that a man named Werner Heisenberg was brought in to take a closer look, who immediately sent a request for nuclear physicist Kurt Diebner, Paul Hartek, a nuclear chemist, and Otto Hahn, who had pioneered the discovery of nuclear fission. When they finished their analysis and told the research team what they thought they had, there was hushed silence. Max and Moritz were no ordinary rockets, but highly advanced ballistic missiles that had been designed for high altitude flight paths, fast reentry, and they were delivering a lethal warhead that was based on the arcane principle of nuclear physics, and not simply chemical explosives. Germany had also been pursuing enrichment and nuclear physics at its *Uranprojekt*, with noted physicists from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute.

“Theoretically,” said Heisenberg, “The amount of fissile material in that warhead might be the equal of one or two kilotons of conventional explosives. But what is amazing here is that the mass of the fissile material is much smaller than I envisioned. I’ve been over calculating the critical mass required. This changes everything. Where in the world did you get these monsters? They certainly were not built here, of that I am certain.”

Now it was clear that these were not the naval rockets that had been the bane of the Kriegsmarine in recent months, but something much more sinister....

* * *

Weeks after Kapitan Heinrich delivered that cache of documents and magazines, and those remarkable missiles, both he and Kapitan Falkenrath were called to Gibraltar. There, in an office building overlooking the former Governor’s Parade, Admiral Raeder sat with a stony expression on his face.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “I have just received a report from Peenemünde. They are convinced that the weapons we delivered are not the naval rockets that have been used against us at sea.”

“Then what are they?” said Heinrich, clearly surprised.

“Ballistic missiles, and it appears that initial assessments believe they have a very long range, and a most unusual warhead. We now believe that what you may have stumbled upon in the South Atlantic was a secret American test project. Given the fact that such a weapon has not been used against us thus far in the war, we conclude that these two rockets are prototype designs—but very dangerous prototypes. I must therefore impress upon you the importance of secrecy in this matter. Nothing whatsoever must be disclosed about these weapons. Understand? As far as you are both concerned, they do not even exist. Furthermore, I want the names of each and every member of your crew who may have set eyes on those rockets. They are to report directly to me at once.”

“I understand,” said Heinrich.

“Detmers finally got through to Casablanca, and he had the ship in question with him as well. I have already had this conversation with him. As for the reports and other documents you have obtained from that ship... The conclusion they lead us to believe is clearly preposterous, but you are to say nothing of them either—not a single word to anyone. Even Hitler himself has not been fully briefed as to the nature and presumed capability of those rockets.”

“What about the radar sets and other equipment?” asked Falkenrath.

“They have been turned over to appropriate authorities for further testing and analysis. It is apparent that our enemies have developed a much higher level of technical proficiency than we believed. This little cache you discovered will prove absolutely invaluable, and for that...” The Admiral reached into his desk drawer, producing two small felt covered boxes, “you are both about to receive the Knights Cross with Oak Leaves. Congratulations! One day soon, the weapons and equipment your daring sortie delivered to the Reich will make a great difference in this war.”

Yes, thought Heinrich, a very great difference. But knowing these weapons were already in development in the United States was most disturbing. And there were so many things about that mission that remained utterly perplexing. After that meeting was over, Heinrich and Falkenrath had a little chat of their own.

“This is all so very strange,” said Falkenrath. “What happened to that aircraft carrier you hit with a 15-inch shell?”

“Should we be discussing this?” said Heinrich.

“What, you just want to take your medal and go back to business as usual? Look, Heinrich, this is just between the two of us. There’s something odd about this whole affair. Do you know that Raeder had all my ship’s logs confiscated?”

“Mine as well.”

“Well let me tell you what he will soon learn, if he doesn’t already know it. We lost contact with you right at the outset of that encounter with those ships down there. My watch logged it at 02:45.”

“The weather was miserable. Why is that surprising?”

“Because we took a good long while searching for you. I doubled the watch, had the radar sets working, everything, but there was no sign of your ship—for almost *two hours*...”

“Two hours?”

“Our log reported sighting *Kaiser Wilhelm* again at 04:10, nearly an hour and a half later, and we did not get positive recognition from your lamp signals until 04:18. Where in God’s name were you all that time?”

“That cannot be right,” said Heinrich. “I’ll admit that one gets pulled into the heat of the moment, and that contact was very sudden, but I am certain the whole incident took no more than five or ten minutes!”

“Two hours, Heinrich, or nearly so. We couldn’t use the wireless, but I was even considering launching a seaplane to get up and look for you. All we saw were those strange auroras, and the empty sea. Then there you were, but well off our original course.”

Heinrich narrowed his eyes. “Since you tell me this, I will say that those documents no one is supposed to know about tell quite a different story. Raeder has said I am not to ever speak a word of it again, and he’s taken the whole lot, every report and file we found on that ship. Detmers and his entire crew from the *Kormoran* have been pulled from that duty and sent somewhere. Something tells me that the men we send to Raeder will all end up being replaced.”

“What’s going on here?” said Falkenrath. “None of this adds up.”

“I think we had better not be too eager to do the math,” said Heinrich. “Can’t you see what has just happened? We are both senior officers—not so easy to get rid of without others in the fleet taking notice. So Raeder just called us in, pinned a nice shiny medal on our chest, and told us to keep our

mouths shut. Frankly, I don't know where we were all that time, Herr Kapitan, or where in the world that enemy aircraft carrier went, or why we should then find that American ship with these rockets, but not a living soul aboard. But I'll tell you this—if the Allies have these weapons operational now, we are doomed, Germany is doomed. It would take us years to catch up, even with those prototypes.”

“That is what is so confounding. They have these rockets—the damage they put on *Hindenburg* and our other ships was plain to see. Yet they only seem to be in very limited deployment. Raeder may be correct. These may only be prototypes, perhaps limited to a very few ships. They haven't been seen in use anywhere else. Hell, we took Moscow from the Russians and not one such weapon was ever directed against us. This is quite bizarre, Heinrich.”

“Yes.... It certainly is. Well, good day, Kapitan Falkenrath. I hope we sail together again one day soon. In the meantime, enjoy your medal.”

Heinrich saluted, turned, and walked away, his footsteps sharp and brisk, his mind still inwardly dwelling on those magazine articles. Detmers was the only other man besides Raeder who knew about them. Something told him that the three of them would end up being the only ones who ever really knew. Really knew what? What is it you think you know, Kapitan, he said to himself? Did you stumble across a ship from another time, from the future? Nonsense, just as Detmers said it best.

But deep down, there was a quiet inner mind that would simply not believe that, and this would not be the only time Heinrich would be presented with clear evidence that this impossible notion as presented in those magazines was really truth. And if it was the truth... The faces of those 24 Ministers of the Reich, all lined up in a double spread, were so very haunting.

I wonder what Raeder thinks about that? He's probably going to wonder a good long while why his own face was not there among that rogues gallery, and why that photo of Döenitz listed him as the Fleet Commander. Yes, he'll be thinking about that for a very long time....

Chapter 6

Raeder was thinking about it, and it fell like a shadow over his mind, a grim realization that the story being told in that strange magazine was a real possibility. I should be elated with this find, and in one sense, I am. We finally have our hands on prototype weapons that the enemy was undoubtedly testing in the deep South Atlantic. But that entire incident was most unusual, most disturbing.

I have read the log books from each ship, and they simply do not agree. Now I know Heinrich and Falkenrath to be sensible, reliable men. I've had my eye on Heinrich for some time now, ever since we lost Admiral Lütjens. He has amassed a most impressive kill record in the few sorties he's been on, and now this astounding find that no one expected.

What really happened down there? How could *Kaiser Wilhelm* stumble on an aircraft carrier, hit it, and yet allow it to slip away? The weather must have been very thick. That is the only thing that can account for it. The *Goeben* actually lost contact with *Kaiser Wilhelm* for well over an hour, according to the logs there—but those on Heinrich's ship tell a completely different story. Very strange.

And what about those fabricated reports Heinrich littered my dinner table with—those odd magazines? Why would the Allies concoct such nonsense—to use as propaganda tools? It makes no sense. And what happened to the crew of that ship Detmers brought in—what an amazing find that was. How could something so valuable be abandoned and set adrift like that at sea. Heinrich says the ship was actually underway at about ten knots when they encountered it. Two precious missile prototypes aboard, and all that advanced equipment, on a derelict ship with no Captain or crew....

It's as if the enemy intended for us to find that ship, which means they intended us to find those missiles as well. Could that be the solution to this puzzle? Are those missiles simply dummies? They know we are aware of their rocket technology, and therefore know we will be stopping at nothing to get these weapons ourselves. So they just leave a few there, on an empty ship. What if they were intended to mislead our technology teams—lead them down false pathways in their research? What if that ship was nothing more

than a Trojan Horse? It is clear those rockets can never be fired to prove they even work. Surely the Americans would know that. No. They can only be studied, analyzed, reverse engineered, and there is never any guarantee that our models will work either.

Look how they went to such elaborate lengths to rub our nose in this assertion that Germany loses the war. How very clever—trot out old General Montgomery, reminiscing on his victory over Rommel; line up all the top ministers of state like common hoodlums. Yes, they were certainly giving us the middle finger in those documents. Here they went so far as to date every log and report to the year 1958, as if to say that is how far ahead of us they are with their rocket technology. Then they leave us a pair of poison pills... I wonder...

Yet those were not the naval rockets that have been used against us. They couldn't be. They are simply too big, and Peenemünde thinks they are multi-stage ballistic missiles, like our own V project designs, yet even more advanced. My god... we've got to find a solution for these naval rockets. Look at the damage they have inflicted on the fleet!

We have lost *Nürnberg*, *Prinz Eugen*, and watched *Admiral Scheer* chastened in the far north—naval rockets. The *Graf Zeppelin* was utterly destroyed, along with destroyers *Loki* and *Siegfried*—naval rockets. *Gneisenau* was sunk by enemy torpedoes in that engagement with the *Rodney*, presumably by an enemy submarine, and *Hindenburg* has also suffered three torpedo hits, though I built that one very well. *Bismarck* sustained so much damage in that duel off Fuerteventura that it will be laid up for at least another nine months.

Thank god we got hold of the French fleet. Their losses are even more staggering: *Bretagne*, *Lorraine*, *Provence*, *Richelieu*, *Strasbourg*, *Dunkerque*, and now *Bearn* in the Pacific. Their entire battle fleet has been gutted, not to mention the loss of eight cruisers! Yet that entire fleet was always expendable. As it stands now, the presence of the *Normandie* and *Jean Bart*, mean a very great deal to our chances at sea now, and their destroyers are worth their weight in gold. Alas, the French Admirals are getting squeamish, though I suppose I cannot blame them.

So many things concerning these new weapons do not make sense. What caused that massive explosion at sea in that earlier Atlantic engagement? What kind of ordnance could the Allies be using? It towered up thousands of

feet in that terrible mushroom cloud. Could it have been something like the secret atomic project our scientists have been working on? I was afraid we would see it again off Fuerteventura, but nothing of the kind was used against us there. Could that earlier explosion in the Atlantic have been the deployment of another prototype like the missiles Heinrich found? If so, and these rockets are the real thing, then that Trojan Horse had a real terror within it. What have we taken within our gates by sending those rockets to Peenemünde?

It took some doing, but a Grand Admiral has some clout after all. I managed to get hold of the preliminary assessment by the technical team at Peenemünde. That is how I knew those were not naval rockets, but ballistic missiles. And now I also know that their warheads were most unusual, possibly the same as the weapon that caused that terrible mushroom cloud in the Atlantic. God help us if the Allies have such weapons now—if they ever have them at all! Then the things they taunted us with in that strange magazine would indeed come to pass. Germany could never win this war, and I am well aware of how our ring leaders in the Nazi Party would be regarded. Thank God I am not a Party man. Is that why my picture was left out of that gallery, or was there some other reason?

The Admiral shook off these impossible thoughts. They could only lead him down inexplicable corridors, into shadow and uncertainty. He had to focus on the here and now. Yet those odd magazines were pretending to know the future, to predict Germany's inevitable fate. They were so utterly persuasive, every photo, every line of text, right down to the silly advertisements. What would I do differently now if that was our future?

That might be a long list. In the meantime he had another list in front of him, and it needed his thought time and attention.

I must get *Hindenburg* back into fighting trim as soon as possible. The superstructure repairs can finish up at Toulon, but after that, I need a good dry dock to look at the hull and see to that torpedo damage. It will be no good trying to run the ship home to Germany. *Hindenburg* is a serious threat right where it is in the Med, or at Gibraltar. Thankfully, the *Normandie* Dry Dock at Saint Nazaire can easily accommodate the *Hindenburg*. So as soon as we tidy up *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the *Goeben*, I will send all three out to that port.

That will be a strong knife at the throat of the Western Approaches, and I will use that task force exclusively for commerce raiding now. Then, in the

south, I stage *Normandie*, *Jean Bart* and *Prinz Heinrich* at Casablanca with strong French destroyer escorts. Another knife to support our continued efforts in Operation Condor.

To keep the British spread thin, I must see that our operations at Trondheim are given high priority. The Nordstern base there must be complete as soon as possible, a city of a quarter million citizens of the Reich, and a strong naval / air base—our North Star. It will be our Singapore of the north, only we will not squander such a marvelous base, like the British did in the Pacific.

From Nordstern I will stage *Tirpitz*, *Scharnhorst*, the fast cruisers *Rhineland* and *Westfalen*, and our new destroyers. To that I can add the carrier *Peter Strasser*, another star in the north to plague the British. And I still have the two older pocket battleships there as well. Once Nordstern becomes a self-sufficient naval base, that entire fleet can be staged there, freeing us of the necessity to transit the North Sea. It will be tasked with shutting down the Allied convoys to Murmansk. Doenitz will have his own u-boat bunker there as well—Dora 1.

But what about Operation Condor? That is my most immediate concern. I could dearly use *Heinrich* and *Falkenrath* down there now, but *Hindenburg* will need a good escort to Saint Nazaire. He sighed, thinking about the stalemate operation in the south.

We have taken Arecife, Fuerteventura and Gran Canaria, yet the naval engagement was so costly to both sides that a lull has fallen over operations. It has taken us much more time than we realized to move in fresh supplies, and to repair the airfields and get aviation fuel, munitions, and service crews there. My use of *Prinz Heinrich* as an aviation fuel ferry ship was quite clever, but we need more tankers. The loss of *Ermland* was difficult to bear. I must get another tanker into the Atlantic as soon as possible.

Then what? We have enough troops to proceed with Operation Condor, even though Rommel still has one of the Mountain Regiments I requested. Now he is bellyaching about our use of ‘all his planes’ to support Operation Condor. He will undoubtedly say the very same thing to Hitler as an excuse for being pushed out of Cyrenaica. That is a dangerous omen. He cannot advance, and now it seems that he cannot even stop the British. If we lose Libya, then the Enemy will be poised to invade Tunisia, and all because the Führer is still so obsessed with the campaign in Russia. Five divisions would

settle the matter in the Mediterranean.... If we could only keep them supplied.

At the moment, Rommel is still holding on to Benghazi, but that port will soon come under attack from Allied air power. The Americans are shipping the British a lot of aircraft now. Rommel will soon want 'his planes' back, but those *Stuka* squadrons are the key to maintaining our hold on the Canary islands. We've caught that bird, but now we must swallow it. The British will undoubtedly attempt to use their sea power to interdict our supply operations to the islands. Against that, my great trump card is air power.

Now we have good airfields on the islands. The British have already had to re-route convoys well out into the Atlantic, and Doenitz is already asking me to get a U-boat pen set up there, perhaps on Fuerteventura. The British won't like that, and the hard fact is that they can make bombardment runs by night to attack those airfields. That was where they inflicted the most harm to the Luftwaffe, when they shelled that damn airfield down south. So I must fight for each and every squadron, and what we need now is the development of a good long range night fighter, and more planes for my aircraft carriers.

Look what the Japanese have done in the Pacific! Here we struggle to support the occupation of these islands, while their navy has overrun the entire South Pacific! They are in a very good position to cut off Australia now, and I wonder if they can manage it. But I could take good lessons from their conduct of naval operations in these last several months. Their ability to project power and sustain it with their navy is absolutely superb, the equal or better of the Royal Navy, and that says a great deal.

The key to all their operations is the aircraft carrier. My god, they brought over 300 aircraft to strike Pearl Harbor. They only use their battleships to support amphibious operations, and as escorts for their carriers, and their cruisers are fine ships. What would the Royal Navy do in the Atlantic if they had to face a fleet built like the Japanese Navy? Yes, I was a fool to dream of 70,000 ton super battleships, though the Japanese have them. They are probably wishing they had invested that money and steel in more aircraft carriers, just as I am now converting the hull of the *Oldenburg* to a new carrier, and renaming it *Brandenburg*. The island superstructure and deck armor is now complete. Soon we will be installing the cranes and hanger elevators. Building a carrier is far easier than constructing a ship like the *Hindenburg*.

Yes, *Brandenburg* will be my Ace in the hole. It will be a marvelous ship, 175 feet longer than the American carrier *Enterprise*, and more than 60 feet wider abeam. Without having to install all those heavy barbettes and turrets, and most of the superstructure, the displacement lightened up considerably. The battleship would have displaced well over 60,000 tons, but the carrier no more than 38,000. Since the power plant and propulsion systems were already finished and built to drive the heavier ship at 30 knots, the much lighter carrier will achieve even faster speeds. All that interior space now gives *Brandenburg* a massive series of hanger decks, and plenty of room for aviation fuel. The ship will have very long legs, tremendous endurance at sea. And now we believe we can get at least 90 aircraft aboard, possibly even more. We can crate spares and easily store them below the hanger deck. The American carrier *Enterprise* carries that many, and it is a much smaller ship than *Brandenburg*.

The design for this new ship is also very ingenious. The Americans had the right idea when they built those two light scout carriers. Since those ships retained forward turrets as hybrids, they decided to give their flight deck a slight angle so the guns would have clear arcs of fire. As *Brandenburg* already had its Anton turret fully installed, I suggested that we simply leave it in place, and then use that marvelous wide beam on the ship to create a second angled flight deck. It looks to be progressing very well, heavily camouflaged under all that netting so the British can't see it from above. This opens up some new possibilities for carrier operations that not even the Japanese have thought of yet.

Yes, all the Japanese, and American carriers as well, have one long straight flight deck. The British build their carriers this way as well. So when they operate, they can only do one thing at a time, either recover or launch planes, but not both. That will not be the case with *Brandenburg*. That angled flight deck will allow us to recover aircraft even while we launch, and I am insisting on steam assisted catapults, four of them. Two will be mounted at the end of that angled deck, and another two on the bow of the ship. That big 16-inch turret will be flanked by a pair of fighters, always ready for takeoff.

At the moment, I can put 42 planes at sea aboard *Peter Strasser* in the north, another 40 on the *Prinz Heinrich*, and 12 on the *Goeben*. When I get *Brandenburg*, I can double that, and if we manage to convert *Seydlitz* and commission that ship as the *Wesser*, then I get 20 more. The *DeGrasse*

conversion looks to be too far off to contemplate. But those other four ships will give me over 200 planes if I concentrate the carriers like the Japanese. That is real naval air power. That is how the Japanese and Americans operate, and we can do the same... that is, if I can keep Goering's fat hands off the planes earmarked for naval assignments. He's likely to demand control of the carriers personally! He has it in his mind that anything with wings belongs to him, and any place those planes are based comes under his thumb. Well, I must be very firm, but also very cautious.

Hitler told me to discontinue the *Oldenburg*, and I have obeyed that order. But wait until the Fuhrer's birthday next year. Wait until I invite him to stroll with me on the deck of the *Brandenburg*. I am risking my entire career on this.

Part III

In for a Penny

“In for a Penny, in for a Pound.”

— **English Proverb**

Chapter 7

MacArthur had barely escaped from the Philippines, spared what would have been an ironic death at the end of a Standard Missile 2 designed by his own countrymen. Captain Harada refused to allow any operation to ambush the American General, in spite of the urgings of his executive officer Fukada.

“Why are you so squeamish?” Fukada had protested. “We’re committed here. You know that as well as I do. Taking out MacArthur would be a real blow to American operations.”

“Possibly,” said Harada. “You could see it that way, and I know you may have a sour belly because of what happened to your family during the occupation. Losing your great uncle like that was hard.”

“Don’t bring that into it,” said Fukada. “This is simply a matter of strategy now. Why not get the primary mover on the other side? They took out Yamamoto, and didn’t bat an eyelash at that.”

“Because we don’t know who we might get in MacArthur’s place. Taking him down is going to create a big hole in this history, and we both know that nature abhors a vacuum. Something has to fill that void, and that will be entirely unforeseen, a real wildcard in the deck. What you have to realize is that our missiles will only take us so far in this. But the knowledge we have about how this war plays out is perhaps the greatest advantage. Take out MacArthur and everything could unwind. He’s the devil we know, likely to influence events in a fairly predictable manner. Don’t you see? We can read MacArthur like a book—literally. We know what they pushed for, what they decided, and that’s real power. Suppose they send someone like Patton over here? He’d be completely unpredictable?”

“That’s ridiculous.... But I do see your point. Yes, Big Mac is the devil we know, I’ll grant you that. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to let him sail into Tokyo Bay on the *Missouri* and rub our noses in those surrender documents.

“That’s a long way off, if it ever happens at all,” said Harada. “The whole point of our being here is to see that it doesn’t have to come to that. But what I’m trying to say is that we can’t see the real ends of any intervention we might make here. You act as though we’re riding this war like a horse, all

nicely tethered and amenable to our every command. Yet we both know it's a pretty wild steed, and things could easily get out of control. Everything we do here will have some consequence. For one thing, what if our presence here becomes widely known? Can you imagine the effect that would have?"

"Who'd believe it?" Fukada shook his head. "Hell, we can still barely believe it ourselves. No, my bet is that we'll remain a secret weapons project, a prototype, to anyone outside the very limited circle of those who know the real truth. There's practically no chance any real knowledge of our presence here would become generally known. People simply would not believe something that fantastic."

"Let's hope you're right, but you see my point, don't you? *We don't belong here*. That's the simplest way I can put it. Everything we do will be an anomaly, an insult to the history, and we have no way of knowing what dominoes will fall because of our actions."

"The damn Russians don't seem to be worrying much about it. They put *Hiryu* down and then roughed up *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* without all this hand wringing."

Harada took a deep breath, thinking about that. "That may end up being our real aim here—the Russians. You're right about one thing. This Karpov fellow seems to have no qualms about using his missiles, or any consequences arising from that. If we go north, then we're going to end up butting heads with that man and his ship. Mark my words."

"So MacArthur gets a pass here?"

"I just can't do what you're asking XO. Call me stupid, but there's something wrong about bushwhacking him with a hot missile, in spite of what the Americans did to Yamamoto. But I'll give you this much, we'll even the score by making sure the Admiral doesn't meet his appointed rendezvous with those P-38s. After all, we need him if this crazy plan of ours is to have any chance of succeeding."

Fukada had to settle for that, but he made one last argument. "Look Captain... Alright, fair is fair, and if MacArthur gets a pass, then we save Yamamoto. I'll go with that. But the time is coming, and very soon, when that Admiral is going to want to see just what this ship can really do. I'll tell you one thing—the Emperor will not accept a negotiated peace if it involves major concessions, and Tojo will fight it tooth and nail. Our plan is crazy, though I'll still support you all the way on this. But you'd better get your

decks cleared and ready for action here. It's coming."

So they left it at that, and MacArthur made his way to Darwin, narrowly escaping from Del Monte Airfield before the Japanese could take it. He would arrive in Australia to learn the US was sending him the 41st and 32nd Infantry Divisions, and a mix of three regiments that would later be formed into the 23rd Division was to be sent to Fiji to relieve the two New Zealand Brigades there. To those forces he could add anything the Australians could make battle worthy, and in this, the three divisions Prime Minister Curtin recalled from the Middle East would play a very prominent role.

The General inclined his head, eyes narrowed with fatigue as he set down the sheaf of reports he had been reading. The memories of Corregidor were still heavy on him, the faces of the men and officers he left behind. He had no choice in the matter, as much as he hated to abandon his command in the middle of a fight.

My god, he thought, the Japanese certainly licked us in the Philippines, and damn good. But this isn't over. I'll be back. It will only be a question of time. Once I get the troops and supplies I need, the aircraft, then we'll see how Tojo likes what I have planned for him.

Strategy... They are all trying to figure out what to do, Admiral King, Nimitz, Marshall and even the President. I mustn't allow the navy to muddy the waters here. The United States has always been a maritime power, but now we're looking at a war on two oceans. It's clear where Marshall stands. He's hot for action this year in the Atlantic, but I must impress upon him the importance of what we're losing now in the Philippines. I must make certain the Pacific Theater is not overlooked.

In the early months of 1942 the United States was debating its war strategy at the highest levels, and the US Joint Chiefs had to decide how to divide up the resources at their disposal. The decision had been made early on that the Western Theater against Germany would be the primary area of US operations. MacArthur could understand that, but with the British pushed back to Burma, the Dutch entirely defeated, and the Japanese in an excellent position to seize the Solomons, he hounded Marshall for everything he could get his hands on, sometimes going right over his head and making direct appeals to Roosevelt.

The President decided to try and make a commitment of 100,000 men to the Pacific territories beyond Hawaii, and also send 1000 planes, the type and

mix to be decided by the joint Chiefs. The first division sent to Australia was the 32nd, and the 1st US Marine Division was being moved into Samoa. Now more troops would soon follow, intending to bolster the defenses of Fiji. For the most part, however, Roosevelt remained convinced that the operations in the west should take precedence over the Pacific.

The planning division, now headed by Eisenhower, was already hard at work on joint US/British operations, and the movement of men and equipment to support them was dubbed BOLERO. He was one damn good clerk when he worked for me, thought MacArthur. Now he's right in the middle of all the high level planning for the western front. Roosevelt wanted action, and he wanted it this year, in 1942. BOLERO was the war chest, and the operation they have in mind was being called GYMNAST.

The situation in the Atlantic was going to get the best units the Americans had, he knew. MacArthur had learned that the 1st, 3rd and 9th Infantry Divisions were being readied for operations there, along with the 1st and 2nd Armored Divisions. Well they mustn't overlook the Pacific.

The German seizure of Gibraltar, France as an active belligerent in Northwest Africa, and Spain's complicity in allowing German troops on its soil were all problems that Eisenhower never had to face in Fedorov's history. The fall of Gibraltar and Malta had effectively sealed off the entire eastern and central Mediterranean, and the action then underway in the Canary Islands with the German Operation Condor was seeing more and more German resources directed to that theater.

The only development that proved in any way hopeful for the Allies was Rommel's defeat on the Gazala Line and his subsequent withdrawal from Cyrenaica. Yet as Eisenhower looked over the plans for GYMNAST, the prospect of trying to invade both North Africa and Spain at the same time was a dual thrust that would tax existing resources. He subsequently flew to the Azores to meet with all the British Principles that would be involved in the operation and hammer the matter out. What emerged from that meeting would then become the first Allied operation on the long road they hoped to walk to victory, but the journey was by no means certain to succeed.

Its first obstacle, in spite of Roosevelt's insistence that the Atlantic be given the highest priority, was the constant drain on resources that were being siphoned off for the Pacific. At one point, Marshall threw up his hands and wrote a pointed memo to the President stating that if 100,000 men had to go

to the Pacific, the necessary shipping and time schedules would set back planning for BOLERO considerably, possibly even precluding it altogether.

The question again landed on Roosevelt's lap, and he was quick to decide the issue saying: "I don't want BOLERO interfered with in any way, and I regard it as essential that active operations be conducted in the Atlantic theater in 1942." If this were to be the case, then the Pacific would simply have to make do with what it had.

Eisenhower and Marshall both thought that would be the end of it, and began drawing up plans to ship troops to Iceland, Ireland, and other Atlantic outposts. It soon became apparent that the operation required for offensive action in 1942—GYMNAST, was going to take considerably more time, materiel and planning than first expected, as well as careful coordination with the British. Even the most optimistic proposals and plan drafts did not see any real offensive beginning until late summer. In the meantime, the situation in the Pacific would continue to worsen with the loss of the Philippines the final blow.

The strategic problem facing the Allies in the Pacific was very much complicated by the hostility of the French. They had bristled when the US demanded Bora Bora as a rear supply base, impudently sending troops there. Then, in the brief hot action of early January, they had tried to exact a toll with a sortie against the US relief convoy bound for the Philippines that had to be diverted to Australia. The *Pensacola* Convoy had been fortunate that a pair of fast escort carriers had been sent to the region, and the diplomatic frost soon melted in the fire of real weapons, as the US put the French carrier *Bearn* under the sea for its meddling. With French now an active combatant in the Pacific, the Japanese had wasted no time in sending a small relief force to the primary bastion of French strength in the SE Pacific—New Caledonia.

The light Carrier *Hiyo* had arrived right in the thick of the disagreement then underway between the Americans and French, covering a small troop convoy bound for Noumea. Aside from its strategic position as a sword cutting right astride the lines of communications between the US and Australia, the Japanese also coveted this territory for its vital copper and manganese mines, resources the Empire was eager to secure.

The small Japanese convoy had carried the Ichiki Regiment to Noumea, the very same troops the Japanese once used to try and foil the early days of US occupation on Guadalcanal. Once there, the regiment distributed its

battalions to the most vital locations, two near the big harbor in the south at Noumea, another further north at the airfield near Kone, and a cavalry reconnaissance units at the northern anchorage of Koumac. Other sites were being surveyed, for the detachment also had aviation engineers there to further develop airfields.

The French had little in the way of ground troops in the New Hebrides, but pressed by Japan in February of 1942 to contribute more to the defense of these important island outposts, two brigades of the Tonkin Division in French Indochina were shipped to the Pacific. Escorted by the Japanese Navy, they arrived just before more powerful American units could be shipped in to seize territories that had been otherwise unoccupied up until that month. By mid-March, the French had troops on Malakula, Ambrym and the more important island of Efate. Vanuatu, a joint holding with the British, saw the deployment of a single battalion in the southern French territory of that island. The northern segment, designated Espiritu Santo, found the only British unit then operating in the Southeast Pacific, a small constabulary force composed of no more than 15 police squads at Hog Harbor. Separated by miles of humid jungle and highland terrain, the two sides simply ignored one another, though both made vociferous claims to the entirety of the island itself.

This de facto Axis occupation of the New Hebrides would have a major impact on the course of events, and shape strategy on both sides. The Japanese already had a plan dubbed 'Operation FS' to move first into the Solomons and then occupy Fiji, thus eliminating the nearest bastion from which the Allies might threaten the New Hebrides. From there, they would then plan to drive the US forces from American Samoa, completing their stranglehold on Australia. With the Americans scrounging up shipping, and trying to muster forces for operations in the Atlantic and Pacific, the vital outpost of Fiji had been occupied by two brigades of New Zealanders, the 8th and 14th. There they labored to construct coastal and AA defenses, and build several airfields requested by the Americans in January.

So in the Pacific, the American plans to contest the Japanese moves to isolate Australia would be complicated by the fact that the enemy now held most all the New Hebrides Islands and New Caledonia. Instead of trying to blunt the Japanese advance south at Guadalcanal, the whole question of whether or not an offensive should first be planned against these holdings

was now being debated.

MacArthur argued that the New Hebrides could not be bypassed in favor of the original plan to oppose the Japanese in the lower Solomons. To do so would leave Japanese air power right astride his line of communications back to the United States. Marshall countered that the US simply did not have the resources to conduct an offensive into the New Hebrides, while also planning and supporting a thrust at the lower Solomons—unless BOLERO were canceled altogether, forsaking any offensive in the Atlantic Theater in 1942. Since Roosevelt would not hear of that, Pacific planners would now have to choose between a campaign aimed at either the Solomons or the New Hebrides, and MacArthur was going to weigh in on that before the navy took charge. He was determined to shape the course of the war now, and mold it into a framework for victory that he was even now assembling in his mind.

Yet first he needed the troops, the divisions, the aircraft, and the situation looked grim. The Japanese were already moving, out from their newly captured bastion at Rabaul like a plague of fitful bats. They were pushing into the Northern Solomons....

Chapter 8

In April of 1942 the first phase of the Japanese Operation FS began with the invasion of the large and important island of Bougainville. With good airfields at Buka and Bonis in the north, and at Buin in the south, it promised to serve as a strong initial support base for all further operations in the Solomons. In the center of the island, the wide Empress Augusta Bay offered a good anchorage, and Shortland Island just south of Buin also offered the prospect of a decent seaplane base. As soon as Rabaul was secure, the Japanese committed three strong SNLF battalions to secure these vital bases on Bougainville, and began moving in air squadrons.

This move set off alarm bells in PACOM and MacArthur's ANZAC command, and the General wanted to know what the Navy planned to do about it. "Nimitz has been dragging his feet with one excuse after another," he said to his Chief of Staff, the newly promoted Major General Richard K. Sutherland. "One day it's fuel problems because of those bunkers the Japs took out at Pearl. The next day it's lack of adequate shipping. I arrive here to find virtually nothing in the cupboard, and now everyone's pinning their hopes on this Doolittle raid they're planning."

"Well we've got to do something," said Sutherland. "We certainly can't do much with the air assets we presently have."

"Marshall was crowing that we already had over 500 planes."

"Right," said Sutherland. "Oh, it looks real good on paper, until you read the fine print. 125 were lost trying to defend Java, 75 were sent to the Aussies, 74 are under repair, and at least 100 are still not even out of the crates and fully assembled! We'll be lucky to have 150 planes available for active service, and then with only a few dozen pilots that really have any experience. The rest are fresh off the boat, green as they come."

"The same can be said for the troops they're sending me. Oh, they're having a fine time in the bars of Brisbane, and giving the Australians fits, but the 41st is hardly ready to take on the Japanese, and the 32nd is no better. Nimitz has the 1st Marine Division, but he wants to go for the lower Solomons. We need New Caledonia first. That's where the Japanese are now, and that's where we need to be. In fact, I intend to insist on this, even if I

have to go directly to the President.”

“I’ve heard Nimitz out on this one,” said Sutherland. “He’s of a mind that if we throw everything we have at the New Hebrides, the Japs will beat us to the table in the Solomons and eat hardy.”

“Perhaps,” said MacArthur, but I’m inclined to think they’ll fight for what they already have. They know full well the importance of their occupation of that island. If we hit them there, they’ll reinforce, and then we’ll do the same. That’s where we start our war. The Solomons will come in time, but not now—not before we get the enemy out of the New Hebrides and secure good airfields to support a drive to the northwest. In the meantime, I’m talking to the Australians about an operation for Milne Bay. The Japanese have already taken New Britain, and they have airfields on New Guinea at Lae and Salamaua. Eventually they’ll see the importance of Port Moresby, which is our only outpost outside Australia in that theater. Milne Bay would cover Moresby’s right flank, and also give us a good anchorage for a line of advance aimed at New Britain. Take that and we cut the Japanese position in the Solomons off at the root.”

“Well if we’re going to ever do that, then we’ll need Nimitz and the Navy, particularly Halsey with the carriers. That’s where our air power is now, not on this clipboard.” He set down the report on air squadrons mustering in Australia. “The pursuit Squadrons are the worst of the lot, he said. Half the planes they sent us are P-39s and the older P-40s.”

“You mean P-40s?”

“No, I mean P-400s. It’s a modified P-39, only worse. Can’t climb worth a damn, and they pulled the 37mm cannon out of the nose and substituted a 20mm gun. The pilots hate ‘em. As for the P-40s, we’ve got all of 92 of those on the roster.”

“Make the best possible use of them,” said MacArthur, “and get them ready, because I intend to move them to Noumea at the first opportunity.”

“Noumea? Who’s going to take that for you General? Surely not the 32nd.”

“No, I think I’ll ask the President to commit the 1st Marine Division there. They’ll take it, then we’ll move the 32nd up and clean shop while they get ready for further operations. Let’s get a letter drafted ASAP.”

* * *

After departing Davao, *Takami* had planned to sail north with the *Yamato* group to Yokohama, but events were soon to command the interest of Admiral Yamamoto in the south. He learned of the steady deployment of forces from America, having seen the material in *Takami*'s library, and then verifying it with Japanese intelligence. The Americans were already building up in Australia, and the navy itself was floating plans to do something about it.

Yes, Australia is the one place they can fall back on now, he thought. The Navy floated several proposals for a possible invasion there, but the Army will simply not support it. Now, with this chaos on Java, everything is in disarray. The entire 2nd Division was shattered by that eruption in the Sunda Straits, right in the middle of our landing operation. Java is a complete mess, and my conference with General Imamura indicated that he intended to hold only the eastern segment of the island near Surabaya. For that he has selected the 38th Division. The remnant of the 2nd has been shipped back to Japan to rebuild, and the 48th was graciously offered to support our planned Operation FS.

The warning I received from those strange officers concerning Midway was most chilling. I had long considered that a fitting target to try and force the American carriers into battle. But the disaster I saw in those photographs, the loss of four fleet carriers, was sobering, to say the least. Is that what would happen if I attempt such an operation now? Is the history fated to repeat itself? How else would it get into those books and photographs I saw aboard that amazing ship? And more... the records and logs of what was happening on the flight and hangar decks of our carriers in the Midway operation was most compelling, right down to the signatures of officers that I could recognize on sight. When I showed these to Ugaki, even he was unable to dismiss it as a forgery.

So now these men, claiming to be our distant progeny, come to us and council me to end this war before it gets truly out of hand. I have asked for an audience with the Emperor, but Tojo responded that he would not be available for some weeks. The impudent little air raid staged by the Americans put bombs very near the Imperial Palace, and I have heard about little else since. That was in the books as well—the Doolittle Raid. That Executive Officer aboard *Takami* tried to warn me about it, and wanted me to

alert our air defenses. The whole idea sounded so preposterous that I decided to wait and see if it could possibly happen as he predicted. It did... How could these men have known that unless they are indeed who they claim to be?

Luckily no real damage was done at Tokyo, and it was more of an insult than a real attack. Yet it underscores what could happen if the Americans do ever get bombers close enough to reach our homeland. I saw the images, terrible to behold, of our cities leveled and burning, and that terrible mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. Is all that fated to come, just as this Doolittle raid occurred, exactly the way these visitors claimed? Can I really do anything to avoid that inevitable fate? Can that ship do anything to help us?

I had to disappoint their Captain when I told him the Emperor had been moved to an undisclosed location, and that no high level audiences would be permitted in the foreseeable future. And Tojo is railing that I must do something about the Siberians before they take any further action in the north. Army chief of staff Sugiyama has been mustering units from the Kwantung Army for the last several months, and preparing for a summer offensive that I will most certainly have to support. As for the Siberians, they have been moving small detachments to northern Sakhalin by air, but cannot move anything more substantial until the sea ice clears in the Sea of Okhotsk, where it is still very heavy, reaching its maximum by late March. It will remain heavy through the end of April. In that interval, I have precious time to see to affairs here in the South Pacific. Come May, with the sea lanes opening in the north, I will have to see about the Siberian threat, but for now.... Operation FS.

Yes, I disappointed this Captain Harada when I told him no audience with the Emperor was possible for the moment, and that it would also be impossible for me to sit idle for another month until that opportunity arises. A most interesting man, that one. I could see he is very conflicted about his situation here, which is only understandable. His Executive Officer is quite another man. He wanted to strike down MacArthur, then immediately challenge the Americans in battle. I must be very careful with that man. Tonight I will hear them out on the prospects for Operation FS, as from what I have been able to discover, there is nothing in their history books about it beyond the initial orders—orders that were cancelled in favor of the Midway

Operation that I, myself, so strongly supported.

I was wrong about Pearl Harbor, wasn't I. And it seems I made more than one mistake if the story of this war as written in those books is a true reflection of these events. It was I who insisted on Midway, and so the responsibility for the losses there would have also been mine. But how very strange. Forewarned is forearmed. Knowing what these men have told me, how could I allow an operation such as the Midway Campaign to ever proceed. I asked Ugaki to collect the best proposals for operations under the assumption that the Midway plan would be shelved. Operation FS is what they handed me, and now I must see what these strange visitors have to say about it.

* * *

"Gentlemen," said Yamamoto, "I have invited you both here to my stateroom again with Admiral Ugaki, and this time to hear your opinions as to operations now proposed by the Navy. I realize you brought me a question concerning peace, even if you did so on a most unusual ship of war. At the moment, it is war that is the order of the day, and we cannot afford to remain idle until the question of peace can be raised with the Emperor, which could take months. Tojo has spirited him away, and no audiences or other high level meetings are to be permitted. That leaves us with some difficult decisions to make, and so I wish to hear your opinions. Admiral Ugaki?"

Yamamoto correctly solicited the feedback of his Chief of Staff first. Ugaki cleared his throat, glancing over at Harada and Fukada, still inwardly disturbed by their presence, in spite of his brief accommodation with Fukada over saké. "The initial question is whether to first continue with our operations in New Guinea, or to move immediately to forge a link with our positions in the New Hebrides by a thrust into the lower Solomons. Two plans have been put forward, which I will briefly describe..." He paused, eyeing Fukada and with a glint of mischief in his eye. "As you are supposedly men of a future time, you should, of course, already know these plans. Yes?"

Yamamoto raised an eyebrow, unhappy with Ugaki's challenge to his guests, but before he could determine how to resolve it, the Executive Officer spoke up.

"Two plans," said Fukada, "*Operation MO* was to be aimed at completing

the New Guinea operation with the seizure of Port Moresby by General Horii's 144th Regiment, the South Seas Detachment. At the same time, and as an adjunct of this operation, a seaplane base would be established with 3rd Kure SNLF Battalion and supporting forces at Tulagi in the lower Solomons. Rear Admiral Shima was to command this force, covered by Rear Admiral Arimoto Goto aboard light carrier *Shoho*, with four cruisers, and one destroyer."

He folded his arms, a smug look on his face, and now it was Ugaki's turn to raise an eyebrow. These plans had only recently been approved by the Imperial General Staff. There would simply be no way these men could be privy to them. Was this nothing more than a good guess? Yet how would they so clearly identify the objectives; the commanders only recently assigned to these missions? Fukada continued.

"Unfortunately, both plans fail. Either one or both should have easily succeeded, but they were not prosecuted aggressively enough. In the first case, the operation was compromised from the very first, because an intelligence unit in Melbourne was able to decode signals traffic. Have we changed our naval code yet? If not, you expose yourself to similar vulnerabilities. The enemy knew we were coming, and the American Admiral Fletcher was sent to stop us with a carrier task force. The engagement that followed became known as the Battle of the Coral Sea. Each side sustained losses, though the Americans were hurt badly with the loss of one of their bigger fleet carriers, while we lost only one light carrier. Even that could have been avoided by strengthening the carrier group assigned to the operation. Hara took in the 5th Carrier Division, but one more carrier there could have made all the difference. As it happened, the resulting air duels depleted our fighters and strike planes to the point where they could no longer adequately cover the troop convoy. Admiral Inoue ordered a withdrawal of the invasion force bound for Port Moresby. Thus the Americans achieved their strategic objective, and this operation was foiled. This led to a long and costly campaign along the Kokoda trail in southern New Guinea in an attempt to take the port from the landward side, but that failed as well. Shall I go on?"

Ugaki looked at Yamamoto, somewhat stunned by what this man had said. He was privy to details of the operation that were closely guarded secrets. Inoue had only just been selected the previous night by Yamamoto to

lead the invasion force and assume overall command. How could this man know that? Somewhat frustrated, he decided to let him speak further, inwardly hoping he would ramble off in error, and subject himself to a stern rebuke.

Yamamoto knew what his surly Chief of Staff was up to here, attempting to discredit these men by prodding them to speak of these otherwise secret plans. Yet it seemed his ploy was back firing on him, and he said nothing, waiting calmly as Fukada continued.

“The other plan to take Tulagi succeeded at first, a survey was also made of the north coast of Guadalcanal to look for suitable sites for an airstrip. One was started near the mouth of the Lunga River, and it became the focal point of a battle for that island that lasted nearly a year, and eventually ended with our shameful defeat and subsequent withdrawal. From that moment on, the enemy was on the offensive. We never recovered, and this was largely because of the disaster at Midway that I spoke of earlier.”

Chapter 9

There was a heavy silence for a moment, and Harada shifted uncomfortably. “We have no way of knowing whether these events will repeat themselves,” he said, giving Fukada a quick admonishing glance. It was clear to him that his first officer had an agenda here. He now saw Yamamoto nod his head, a sober expression on his face.

“Your information is very accurate,” he said. “I do not even think the *Kempetai* could have uncovered some of the details you just related, at least not for another week or two. Those were the officers selected by Admiral Ugaki and I only last night, and we have not disclosed this information to anyone else. Now you sit here and recite all this chapter and verse, as if it has already occurred.”

“For us,” said Harada, “it has occurred. It is part of the history I showed you in our library. While things we have seen here are remarkably divergent, such as all this concern over Siberia, it seems some bells ring true, no matter when they are sounded.”

“Then you are telling us all these plans will fail?”

“Possibly,” said Fukada. “Knowing the outcomes, and why they failed, should allow us to prevent that. First off, no orders should be transmitted using the existing naval code until it has been updated. Secondly, if adequate carrier forces are assigned, I see no reason why the Port Moresby operation should fail, and more force at the outset sent to Guadalcanal could prevent the counterblow planned by the enemy. That island was the objective of the first American offensive of the war.”

“Not the New Hebrides?” said Ugaki. “Not New Caledonia? How could they leave those territories on their flank? Are you saying they bypassed those islands in favor of this attack into the Solomons?”

“Not exactly sir,” said Fukada. “No. The Americans already controlled the New Hebrides in the history we know. We never had any troops on New Caledonia, and in fact, they made Noumea their major support base for the Solomons operation at Guadalcanal. But things are quite different this time around. If we have strong forces on New Caledonia, that may be their first objective.”

“Then this is something you do not yet know?”

“It never happened in our history.”

“Yet you say the Americans are reading our JN-25 Naval code. Can you read theirs?”

“That may be possible.” Fukada looked at Harada now, a question in his eyes. “Perhaps our Ensign Shiota might manage that sir.”

“Perhaps,” said Harada, wishing his XO would lighten up here. “Assuming her Captain orders that.”

Ugaki smiled, pointing a finger back and forth at the two men. “These two do not quite see eye to eye on all of this, Admiral Yamamoto. Like two rats in the same maze, this one wants to gnaw his way through the walls to get at the cheese, while the Captain here prefers to sniff out every possibility before he commits himself.”

“A wise precaution,” said Yamamoto. “Isn’t that the point of the Lieutenant Commander’s warning here? Things must be well considered, and not pursued rashly or without adequate force or preparation. And yet, that said, we must act, and soon. There is one other plan we have not yet discussed. Perhaps you will know of it as well. We call it Operation FS.” Yamamoto looked at Fukada again.

“Ah,” said Fukada. “The Fiji Samoa operation. Yes, under the present circumstances, with our forces already on New Caledonia, a bold move now could fatally compromise American plans. I cannot give you details of this operation as I could with the Moresby plan, because it was cancelled in the history I know.”

“Cancelled?”

“Yes sir, the losses we sustained at Midway made that almost impossible. It never occurred.”

“I see... Well it may interest you both to know that I am issuing operational order 626 this very day, though not before we introduce a new coding system. In it, I will formally cancel the planned operation against Midway, and instead make those forces available to support Operation FS.” He said nothing more, waiting to see how these men would react.

“That is very wise sir,” said Fukada. “While Midway was a battle that we also should have easily won, the Americans again had the benefit of knowing our plans in advance. They have broken the naval code, and your order to reverse this setback is most welcome.”

“What are your thoughts concerning such a plan?” asked Yamamoto.

“Well sir, we know the Army’s view was that after the conclusion of Phase I operations, positions should be secured for a defensive front, and troops repatriated for operations in the north. The Navy, however, was not content to stand on defense, but sought some decisive engagement ground with the enemy, preferably within our sphere of influence. That Midway was selected was regrettable, as it was not in our sphere of influence at that time, and saw our fleet dispersed in a very complex operation far from any supporting bases or land based airfields. Your Operation FS is something altogether different. Beyond merely seeking decisive engagement with the enemy, it also has a broader strategic aim, that being the isolation of Australia as a base from which the enemy can mount offensives of their own. These are the crucial early months to accomplish that task, before the buildup of strong enemy forces in Australia. We already have the New Hebrides, which is a major strategic advantage that cannot be underestimated. Now is the time to link our position in the Northern Solomons to forces in the New Hebrides, and to strengthen those forces as far as possible.”

“And your view on the possible invasion of Australia?”

“Not practical beyond the occupation of a few coastal enclaves to deny the enemy the use of air bases and anchorages. Darwin, Cooktown, or other landings in the Cape York area may be advisable, but no general invasion aimed at central or southern Australia would be possible.”

“Yes,” said Ugaki. “The army has told us it would take twelve divisions to invade Australia, and we simply do not have them, let alone the sea transport to move them and keep them supplied. I tend to agree that Australia might be raided, but never occupied. But it might be strangled to death, smothered, isolated to a point where it no longer poses a threat as an enemy base of operations. This is the point of Operation FS.”

“At the same time,” said Yamamoto, “we cannot allow the enemy to regroup their naval forces. We must therefore also see this operation as a means of seeking out and destroying the American Navy.”

“Agreed,” said Fukada, looking at the Captain now, and realizing he had been dominating the discussion while Harada brooded silently. Yamamoto noticed this, and turned to invite the Captain’s thoughts on the matter.

“Captain? Do you have anything to say on this?”

Harada shrugged. “Well sir, while it is all sensible from the standpoint of

strategy, it is still very far from the mission we set before us when I took the risk of contacting you. Here we are talking about destroying the American Navy, but we came here hoping to find a way to avoid further escalation of the war—a way to find peace.”

“I understand what you are saying,” said Yamamoto. “My heart has been heavy with that question since the war began, but here we are, faced with a growing enemy, clear opportunities, and with the matter of peace not even ours to negotiate. It must be handled at the highest levels of our government. Given the situation as it stands, perhaps we must see the operation before us as a means of clearly demonstrating to the Americans the futility of further hostilities.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. Do you honestly believe that the United States will cease operations in the Pacific and sue for peace if we succeed here? Suppose we take Fiji and Samoa? Will they quit? From this point forward, they will get stronger and stronger. Their first offensive occurred at Guadalcanal, but it seems to me that it will simply be aimed somewhere else when it comes. Has anything been communicated to them aside from our continual fervor in prosecuting this war? How can we ever expect them to reciprocate to any diplomatic initiative if we stand ready to annihilate their fleet and carry out further offensives like this?”

“Talk softly,” said Fukada, “but carry a big stick. Isn’t that a famous maxim of American foreign policy? What were they doing in the Philippines? Who did they take those islands from? Why did they impose an embargo on Japan, as they now support our enemies in China? America was never our friend, until they beat and harnessed us like a man might tame a wayward horse. I will agree with one thing, Captain. They will not stop this war for the niceties of diplomacy. It is simply too late for that. I supported your plan to seek accommodation, but things are as they are. It is a matter of survival for us now, and you know full well what is coming. From my perspective, it is imperative that we support Japan to create the most unassailable military situation possible. That is all this discussion is about. Operation FS will start us down that road.”

“Will it? Right now MacArthur is sitting in Brisbane and scheming on how he can mount an offensive aimed at New Britain.”

“You made sure he’d make it there,” said Fukada quickly. “I had other ideas.”

“Don’t bring that up now,” Harada hardened his stance, straightening in his seat. “Understand my point. We can’t take Australia. You pointed out the futility of that just a moment ago, and even the Japanese Army itself opposes any such planning. Now you can run your operation FS and possibly succeed, but all it will do is buy a little more time. The Americans already have five fleet carriers in the Pacific by now. That matches your *Kido Butai*, and the Midway disaster should be a strong warning to you—they know how to fight with those carriers. They’ll add three *Essex* Class carriers within a year, and more and more will come. If we sink one, they’ll build three more to replace it. That’s the war you’re looking at soon, and the missiles under our forward deck will only take us so far down this road to the unassailable position you fantasize about. Well, no position on this earth will ever be unassailable—not in this goddamned war. It will be no holds barred. Understand? Nothing we do here will stop the Americans from continuing to prosecute this war. We must either make peace, or dig in for the whole show, and you and I already know how that ends.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” said Fukada. “If we are clever, resourceful—if we pick our engagements with good foresight and planning, then we can stop them. The *Enola Gay* need not ever come anywhere near our shores.”

Ugaki smiled. “This one tells us how we can win the war, this other one tells us we must lose it, come what may.”

“I beg to differ,” Admiral,” said Harada. “My executive Officer tells you how we can fight this war, but he is also smart enough to know we simply can’t win it. I’ll tell you that. He won’t.”

Fukada folded his arms. “We may not be able to win this war decisively, but at the very least, we can prevent *them* from winning it. We can make their road to our homeland so costly a venture that they may have no other choice but to seek a negotiated settlement. If we act now, and vigorously, then we might dictate terms favorable to Japan. If we equivocate at this key juncture, wasting time in seeking negotiations that you already know the Americans and British will not entertain, then we lose the advantage we have now. Face it, Captain. Our enemies will not give us peace now. It’s too late. The only way we can have that is to take it from them, show them there is no alternative, and there is no better time than this moment. You know that, as well as I do. The real difference is that I’ll admit it, and speak my mind, but

you won't."

"Gentlemen," said Yamamoto. "It is clear you have differing views on this matter. I have heard both, and while I look for a way to end this war as swiftly as possible, I am a realist. Given that we cannot now proceed with a negotiated settlement, I can only do what honor demands, and seek the most advantageous outcome possible for the forces under my command. I have asked, and you have answered, Captain Harada. You have placed your ship at my disposal, but now I must ask you if you can continue to lead your ship and crew if the only immediate choice before us is renewed offensive operations. We will soon have to take steps to check the threat in the north posed by the Siberians. I expect they will attempt further operations by mid-May. Until then, we have time that cannot be wasted, six precious weeks that cannot see our forces sit idle. If we do so, the Army will withdraw its support and return units to the homeland. So I have decided. Operation FS will proceed immediately, and if you are true to your word, I will expect the full cooperation of your ship and crew."

Harada shrugged, but said nothing. It was clear to Yamamoto that he was a reluctant warrior, but he also thought that of himself. His studied eye had taken the measure of the man. There was a reserve of calm water in the center of his soul that will be the source of his real strength. His Executive Officer puts on the brave front, and he is the hot volcano wanting to explode as that monster did in the Sunda Strait. Together the two may balance one another, as yin and yang, but I must watch this relationship carefully.

"Admiral Ugaki," he said. "Please brief us on the planned offensive."

Ugaki bowed his head briefly, acknowledging the Admiral's decision. "We had thought these operations would have to be conducted on a shoestring, but given the swift capitulation of enemy resistance on Java, we do not perceive a threat from the British on that front. Therefore, the Army has placed the entire 48th Infantry division from Java at our disposal. The 38th will remain there as garrison, except one detachment under Sakaguchi. Beyond that, we will employ the South Seas Detachment, Shoji Detachment, and other Naval Marine groups in these operations."

"Where will we begin?" asked Fukada eagerly.

"Port Moresby. Orders to that effect will be sent immediately, using an altered Book B encoding. Orders indicating our intention to strike at Midway will also be disseminated using the old Book B encryption keys. After

discussion with Admiral Yamamoto, it was determined that Operational order 626 would be transmitted in the new code, Book C, but that every outward sign would be made to convince the enemy that Midway and the Aleutians is our next objective. It is our hope that if the Americans have broken Book B, then they will muster their carrier forces to oppose the fictitious Midway operation, leaving our carriers free rein to support operations in the Solomon Sea.”

“One comment,” said Fukada. “At present, the only way you can disseminate information on the new code encryption keys is by using the existing code, correct? That will be risky. They may learn we are changing our code, and act accordingly.”

“What else can we do?”

“Just use the existing code for the moment, Book B, but assemble all forces required for either operation at Truk. There it will be possible to meet with all senior officers, informing them of the new encryption keys in person. Our people can help with this. We also have equipment on board that can help the transition to a new code. Otherwise, I agree that the orders pertaining to the Midway Operation should be sent in the old code, as long as our forces know enough to ignore them.”

“Very well,” said Yamamoto. “Truk is a suitable point to muster the fleet. At that point we will issue orders that appear to indicate Midway as the next target, and even dispatch initial covering forces as a ruse. Then the real operation aimed at Port Moresby will proceed instead.”

“And after Port Moresby?” Fukada seemed to have a restless energy about him now.

“Port Moresby will be taken,” said Ugaki, “concurrent with two other operations. One will be aimed at Tulagi and Guadalcanal, the second to reinforce New Caledonia with the Shoji Detachment, and then, once these objectives have been secured, the 48th Division will invade Fiji. We will meet to discuss concluding operations again after the successful completion of that invasion. In the meantime, your ship, *Takami*, will be assigned to operate with the *Kido Butai*.”

“Where will *Yamato* operate?” said Fukada.

“This ship will remain at Truk as a floating operational Headquarters.”

“If I might make a suggestion... it was found that one great flaw in our Midway deployment was the segregation of heavy fleet elements from the

carriers. In effect, our carriers now operate independently, with only cruiser escorts. Later in the war, the Americans discovered that the heavy AA fire support from their battleships and heavy cruisers served to add a strong measure of support against possible enemy air attack. May I suggest we consider adopting such a policy? It would mean that we assign fast battleships and cruisers in direct support of the *Kido Butai*, and not in a separate screening task force.”

Ugaki deferred to Yamamoto on this, and he considered it briefly before responding. “I find such a proposal interesting,” he said. “In fact, I think I will order it. *Yamato* is already being referred to as “Hotel *Yamato*” at Truk. *Musashi* is due there soon, and certain Combined Fleet support elements can transfer to that ship. But yes, I think I will take *Yamato* out with the *Kido Butai*, and Admiral Ugaki, please assign any additional fast battleship support that may be available. If nothing else, I will have what the Americans call a front row seat to these operations. Now then... The timetable... Gentlemen, if I am correct, we have the next six weeks to try and win this war. Should we fail, then we can all sit here again and argue about how best to lose it. Yet for now, I want your full and unqualified support. The British also have a quaint expression which applies here: in for a penny, in for a pound.”

He smiled.

Part IV

Hook, Line and Sinker

“There are two types of fisherman - those who fish for sport and those who fish for fish.”

— Attribution Unknown

Chapter 10

Karpov was restless. The long hiatus imposed by the harsh Siberian winter had left him chafing for action. Yet ice in the Sea of Okhotsk was particularly severe that winter, one of the coldest in memory, and so he had taken *Kirov* down through the Kuriles as Fedorov advised, and out into the North Atlantic. They moved at night, through thick weather, with excellent charts of these waters, and passed quietly through the Nadezhdy Strait, a 20 mile gap between two small rocky islands. Radar returns from the high volcanic peak of Sarychev Mountain on the northern isle of Matua guided them through, and the Admiral mused on the fickle nature of the earth itself.

So Krakatoa has blown its top down south, he thought, and right in the middle of the Japanese landings on Java. From all reports the entire western segment of that island is largely uninhabitable now. That must have cost the Japanese a good deal in men and ships if they landed where Fedorov predicted they would. The British pulled out, having no stomach for the fight after that, though it was probably a simple case of logistics that forced their withdrawal.

That's my problem now, isn't it—logistics. I have good divisions waiting at Magadan for this damn ice field to thin out, but Fedorov tells me winter may hang on longer than normal now. That damn volcano has sent up so much silt and ash that it's literally blocking sunlight from reaching the earth. It wasn't even supposed to happen this year. The eruption was supposed to occur in 1883, but Mother Nature can be a headstrong lady. Look what she did to us right in the middle of that fight with Tanner and his 7th Fleet in 2021.

Yes, it was that demon of a volcano that sent me here, and I had a real good look at what the US Navy is going to look like by 1945. A pity I was on the wrong side back then, and still hot headed from that engagement with Tanner. All I could see was red when it came to the Americans, and I picked a fight there without properly thinking the situation through. *Orlan* paid the price for that, and everyone aboard. I never really did think to look in the history books to see how that little farce was written up, but then again, what does it matter? It's 1942 here now, and everything is different. My little sortie

to 1908 took care of that, but it also gave rise to the dragon I am now dueling with up here—Imperial Japan. None of those events I lived through in 1945 are ever likely to happen now, particularly since the Americans will be on my side this time around.

Hell, they were unbeatable without me, but with *Kirov* at my disposal, the outcome of this war is certain now. I've already shown the Japanese that I'm not to be trifled with. Fedorov tells me they were worried about the opening of a northern front all through these early months of the war. Well, now I've given them one. The loss of Kamchatka must have reddened quite a few faces in Army and Navy circles in Japan. The loss of that aircraft carrier and the other ships I pummeled also clearly demonstrated what I can do to them if they dare to oppose me.

Yet Fedorov tells me they'll keep fighting. He says the Japanese Empire will simply not quit. In fact, that little tidbit he shared the other day was quite revealing. They have no word in their language to describe what we would call a military retreat. The word they use simply means "advance in a new direction." And any withdrawal they make is simply viewed as a consolidation aimed at preparing for a new offensive.

So I must not underestimate my enemy here. I must think this through from a strategic standpoint, and in doing that, Fedorov has been most useful. He tells me that our occupation of Petropavlovsk may not be as important from a strategic standpoint as I had planned. I wanted to immediately offer those airfields to the Americans, but Fedorov says it is all of 1500 miles from that place to Tokyo, well outside the combat radius of their B-17 bombers, which is under 900 nautical miles with a basic bomb load, and under 700 nautical miles with a maximum bomb load. They could barely reach the northern tip of Hokkaido from there. How inconvenient. Beyond that, we both know weather conditions at Petropavlovsk are miserable most of the time. It's one of the foggiest regions of the world.

If I wanted to hit Tokyo, I would have to possess bases in Southern Sakhalin, Karafuto to the Japanese, at least until the Americans produce their B-29 bomber, but that is some years off. Fedorov says that the ranges to any targets of value would require a very direct route, and it would force the bombers to fly right over Japanese held territory in Hokkaido, where they would most likely sustain very heavy losses. If I wanted to approach from the sea, then it would mean I have to hold islands in the southern Kuriles, as far

south as Ostrov Iturup, which the Japanese call Etorofu, and that's where my friend the Demon lives. Might it awaken one day here like that monster in the Sunda Strait? Not likely, but always something to think about. I can't take anything for granted now, not in these Altered States.

So I need that island as an end point of my planned offensive, and I need to drive the Japanese completely off Sakhalin Island. I already have a toe hold in the north with troops I've moved in by airship, but that force isn't big enough to conduct a real offensive south. It will take strong reinforcements, one or two more divisions from Magadan, and I can't lift them until mid-May, when ice conditions ease up. Even so, the Japanese will reinforce from Hokkaido, so that is likely to be a very bitter fight when we get down south on Sakhalin Island.

As for the Kuriles, my amphibious landing capability is very limited. I have a small transport fleet, and I must protect those ships using *Kirov's* AA defense shield at all costs. I thought the Americans could help out with additional shipping, but Fedorov tells me resources were very thin at this time in the war. I'll prosecute these campaigns, and also have my younger self apply pressure on Northern Manchuria, but so much of our combat power has been sent to Sergei Kirov that we will have real limitations in this theater.

For the moment, I still have *Kirov*, and we'll operate from Petropavlovsk, a nice Northern Pacific outpost. I know what the Japanese will be up to soon—Midway and their Aleutian Islands Operation. Perhaps the best way I can hurt them now is to insure that battle becomes the naval disaster it was for them, and help the American fleet get up a good head of steam here. They pulled off their Doolittle Raid, right on schedule. It's amazing to see how the history walks in its own shadow. So Midway will be the next operation, or perhaps that preliminary carrier duel in the Coral Sea.

I've had Nikolin intercepting Japanese military signals for some time now, and Fedorov produced a nifty little program that decodes everything. It looks like Volkov didn't even have the presence of mind to tell the Japanese the Americans were reading their code. Very well... How to best position *Kirov* to ambush the Japanese carriers? I thought they would react much more violently to our Kamchatka operation, as did Fedorov, but they've been very cagey. It appears they have learned to fear and respect the naval threat I now represent.

As soon as Nikolin informs me that signals traffic for the Japanese

Midway operation picks up, I'll take *Kirov* southeast from Petropavlovsk. About 1200 nautical miles should do the trick. That will put me a little north of the historical route of approach of their vaunted *Kido Butai*. This is going to be like shooting fish in a barrel. I can spare the Americans a lot of hand wrenching, take out all four carriers for them in one coordinated missile barrage, and then simply radio the US fleet the position of Yamamoto's group and the invasion fleet approaching Midway. I'll let the American carriers finish the job, and that will be that.

Yes, after Midway, Japanese naval power will be a shattered sword. I'll see to that. Then perhaps they'll pay just a little more attention when I renew my demands for the return of Vladivostok and Primorskiy Province. Fedorov thinks they'll just dig their heels in as they did historically, but perhaps I can get them to consider a negotiated settlement with me. Can I afford to consider a separate peace here? How would the Americans view that?

After I win the Battle of Midway for them, they will most likely be very inclined to treat with me as an equal. At the moment, they are open to my proposal to provide airfields on Siberian territory, though Fedorov tells me they are doing so more as a means of opening a new Lend Lease route by air to Soviet Russia. I think I had better watch that closely. I should demand the lion's share of any supplies that come over Siberian territory. After all, my support for Sergei Kirov has been more than generous.

Alright, it now looks like I can expect the decisive turning point in all this within 30 days or so—Midway. After that it is merely a matter of holding Japan's feet to the fire until they yelp with so much pain that they will make the concessions I demand of them. After they lose their precious carrier fleet, they may not be so eager to have me as an active belligerent on their northern flank. If I get what I want, then the Americans can handle the rest, and I'll focus my energy on resettling Primorskiy Province and supporting the Soviets. And I mustn't forget Ivan Volkov.

He smiled now, thinking of the recent forced withdrawal Volkov made from his Trans-Volga bridgehead. Strange, he thought. This time the Germans got into Moscow, and even took most of that city, but the Soviets still pulled off that amazing Winter Counteroffensive—thanks to the three Siberian Shock Armies I sent to Georgie Zhukov. If I had them here, and had adequate shipping, I could retake Sakhalin Island and the Kuriles in a heartbeat.

So where is the Eastern Front likely to go now? Fedorov thinks the Germans will operate in the south. They already have the Crimea, though the Soviets are still holed up in Sevastopol. Fedorov thinks they will plan and execute an offensive something like their *Fall Blau*, Operation Blue. That was the drive that took them all the way to Stalingrad—Volgograd now. Sergei Kirov will not give that city up without a major battle, so that is where the real action will be as soon as the weather and ground conditions permit.

I'm told the Germans are introducing new tank designs, and much earlier than they did in the real history. I wonder if Volkov is behind all that? Tyrenkov tells me that the British have a new heavy tank in North Africa as well. It also fought in Syria, and stopped the German intervention there cold, so it must be very good. Yet my intelligence Chief has been unable to get me any real hard information on this development. I must light a fire under him about that.

One day I will need to consider the mechanization of my own forces. Kirov has been true to his word in allowing me to wet my beak as his new T-34s come off the assembly lines. I've been able to put together a few tank brigades for my forces around Irkutsk, but they are nothing approaching the tank army strength I will need if I have to really get serious with the Japanese and invade northern Manchuria. Beyond that, I wonder if the Soviets are also working on new designs. I've given Sergei Kirov a lot of friendly advice, but suppose I deliver the blueprints for the Josef Stalin Tank? It will have to be called something else of course. Yes, the JS-1 will be rightfully relabeled the VK-1, and they'll call it "Vlad" for short.

That prompted another smile, though he knew the tank would likely be named the SK-1 if it was ever designed and produced. Sergei Kirov will want his name on a few more things than cities and towns. But if the Germans are building new tanks, we must do the same. Perhaps I can trade those blueprints for a commitment to bolster my air force. My Zeppelin fleet is very useful, but I need fighters and better bombers as well. I can't build them here, but the Soviets can, and the Americans. And I have things to trade both parties for the toys I need. For now, however, I must finish up arrangements for Operation Midway. The Japanese are about to get the surprise of their lives!

At that moment, Tyrenkov came in. He had come over from *Tunguska* to make his monthly report to the Siberian Karpov, relating details of the

operations now being coordinated by his younger self.

“Has *Baikal* shaken the dust off and worked into the fleet yet?” Karpov wanted to know about the latest T-Class airship that had just been commissioned.

“Yes sir, and the Admiral was very pleased with it. He took it out for a shakedown cruise, and it performed as expected. On that note, he has asked if an additional *Oko* radar panel and radio sets could be sent over, and any light AA missiles that may still be available would be most useful.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “Every T-Class ship will get *Oko* Panels.” He had been taking the light SAMs that were in inventory for his KA-40s and sending them to equip *Tunguska* with a formidable air defensive shield for his Zeppelins. The airships were quite durable with their amazing self sealing gas bags and the inert helium lifting gas making them less vulnerable to incendiary rounds. They could hold their own against most fighter attacks, and dish out a great deal of firepower on defense. With the missiles, and the *Oko* panel radar sets to see the enemy coming, he could rest assured that his Zeppelin fleet would remain a viable force. Its only real vulnerability in the operations he had been conducting was to ground based heavy flak guns. A 90mm AA gun could wreak havoc on one of those easy targets.

His brother self had been busy coordinating the airlift of troops and supplies to the northern Sakhalin bridgehead. He had a Marine battalion on defense there, and was bringing in additional air mobile troops with supporting heavy weapons by air, mostly flying during heavy overcast days to minimize the threat of enemy air interception.

“The Japanese are bringing in reinforcements from Hokkaido,” said Tyrenkov.

“As we expected.”

“It isn’t much, just one more additional regiment.”

“That should not prove difficult to overcome, but I’ll want a full division in Northern Sakhalin before we make our push. And don’t forget that we have to seize Lazarev on the mainland, and the mouth of the Amur River. That waterway is our route inland in the north. In the south, I’m still pinning my hopes on the planning for the Chikhacheva Bay operation. Once we push as far south as Aleksandrovsk, the time will be ripe for that. It will be quite easy to move west into Primorskiy Province from there, and then we can follow the Amur River for the real offensive push to Khabarovsk. I want to

try and get there by July, and clear all of Sakhalin Island as well. Then we plan the Vladivostok operation. For now, I must turn my attention to breaking the back of the Japanese Navy, which should be accomplished in due course.”

Karpov was very pleased with himself, a smug confidence being the outward cloak his darkened soul wore each day. His muse seemed very well reasoned, very logical and precise. But he was very wrong, at least about the battle of Midway. And he would soon find out that the artful stratagem of surprise could be used against him as well.

Chapter 11

Orlov looked at Fedorov, his eyes wide with shock and surprise. The flood of memories now burst through that broken window and threatened to drown him. It all came back, like one dream after another in an endless cascade of recollection. It was as if some heavy concealing fog had suddenly lifted over that stormy sea, and he could now see and know everything he had lived through in the long saga he had endured with the ship.

Just like Fedorov.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” he breathed. “The helicopter. That was how I found myself in the sky, and I *jumped*, to save my ass because the goddamn ship was firing at me! Karpov! That bastard tried to kill me. Yes, I put my fist in his belly for the bullshit he pulled when he tried to take the ship. He worked it so the whole damn thing would rest on my decision. I can still see that shit eating grin on his face.”

“My god,” said Fedorov. “Then you remember that? You remember it all now Chief?”

“Like that French Cologne,” said Orlov. “Yes...” He looked around him, feeling like an entirely new man. Yet there was the same old familiar ship, and he also possessed the recent memory of the experience they had lived through these last months. “This is crazy,” he said, shaking his head. “This is just goddamned crazy. I must be losing my mind.”

“No Chief,” said Fedorov quickly. “Hold on a second. The same thing happened to me. That’s why I was so shocked when I first saw you on the bridge. That’s why I flat out keeled over when I saw Karpov. I knew there was no way he could be on this ship. Chief! Stay with me. You remember now, don’t you. You remember everything.”

Orlov was so stunned that he reached for the nearest chair and sat down, a confused look on his face, a mix of anger, frustration and profound surprise and awareness. It was too much for him at the beginning, and he closed his eyes, breathing hard.

“Easy does it, Chief. It happened to me as well, but as far as I know, you and I are the only two men on this ship that remember anything of the past. Zolkin showed a few signs of waking up, but he hasn’t really broken through

the fog yet. Take it easy. Give yourself a few moments. I'll help you get through this."

"Then they weren't dreams," said Orlov. "We fought—busted up the British, and then went to the Med. That's where I got pissed off and jumped ship. Yes, I lied about that, Fedorov. I told you it was all an accident, but I just gave you a shovel full of good bullshit. I jumped ship—had every intention of getting to Spain, and I eventually did, no thanks to that bastard Karpov. He tried to shoot me right out of the sky. I swear, I'll kill that fucker if it's the last thing I do!"

"Hold on, Chief—wait a second." Fedorov could see Orlov was still very agitated, and he knew this was a critical moment. He had to calm him down, reign him in, for he could become a runaway wild steed here, and do anything. "It wasn't Karpov," he said at last. "Since we're telling the truth here now, I gave the order to fire those missiles."

"What? You?"

"I was Captain. Remember? I was on the bridge and Karpov was second fiddle at that time. He was still trying to atone for his failed mutiny—and yes, we knew he was the one that put you up to it Chief. Volsky and I knew Karpov was behind it all along."

"Then why the fuck did you want me dead?"

"I had no choice. I was thinking that if you got that helo to the Spanish coast and it was ever found, then all hell would break loose here. They would have all that modern technology. So I did the only thing I could think of. Yes, Karpov pushed for it, but I was the one who gave the order to fire. I'm sorry Chief... Sorry for everything..."

Orlov closed his eyes, hand heavy on his forehead, becoming a fist which he beat slowly on his brow. "Crazy bullshit," he breathed.

"I'm sorry Chief. I was wrong to do what I did, and I tried to make it up to you. When we learned you were alive, I did everything possible to come after you. I knew we had to find you and get you safely back to the ship. And then I stood on your side of things with Volsky, got you reinstated to your post as Chief of Operations. I knew I was guilty as hell for what I did, and I was trying to fix it. Hell, that's all I've been trying to do here from the first moment this happened to us—trying to fix everything, set it all right again, but we can't do that any longer. It's too late now. We've ripped the history I knew to shreds, and I'm mostly responsible for that. All I've been doing is

trying to live it through, like a man riding a wild bull, and half the time I just wind up falling on my ass.”

He was pleased to see Orlov offer a grin as he said that. “Alright Fedorov,” said the Chief. “Don’t worry about it. What was done, was done. I understand what you did, but Karpov... That bastard is something else. Are you telling me he doesn’t remember anything?”

Fedorov hesitated briefly... “Not quite,” he said. “I mean... Yes, Karpov remembers. In fact, he’s the only other man on the ship that does. Everyone else is completely in the dark, except perhaps Zolkin. He’s showing signs of coming around. It’s very strange.”

“No shit! Then Karpov knows everything?”

“In fact,” said Fedorov, “he’s the same man that sailed with us from Severomorsk. Yes, he’s the same man who tried to take the ship, and the man we went after on *Kazan*. Then we thought he was dead for a time, until I got information that he was in Siberia.”

“Then it’s all true? The airship? That thing I found—that’s what you took from me, that thing I found in Siberia? Everything is true? We found those British troops in the desert?”

“Right, all true. It all happened, and I thought I was the only one who remembered it. I took that thing you found—Troyak called it the Devil’s Teardrop, remember? Well I threw the damn thing right off the ship, and into the deepest part of the Atlantic we could get to at that time. Who knows, it may have had something to do with what happened to *Kazan*. Then we tried that final shift, but things were very weird on the ship before that. We were running right up on the arrival date for this ship—a paradox. Things were very strange on the ship. Remember Lenkov? Then people started disappearing, and by God, you were one of them, Chief. You had been checking the ship to look for other signs of damage from the shift, you know, dented bulkheads, missing ladders. Remember how my shoes got stuck on the deck of the bridge? I almost suffered Lenkov’s fate. Well, you pulled this out of your pocket and gave it to me.”

Orlov stared at the thing Fedorov held out in the palm of his hand. “My compass... yes... I remember giving it to you. Damn thing was useless....”

“Then what, Chief? Do you remember anything else happening?”

Orlov furrowed his brow, trying to recall, but that veil of unknowing was there, like a heavy fog and the more he strained to see through it, the thicker

it became.

“Then I was here... On this ship. But I didn’t know anything—none of this shit. It was as if everything was starting over again, only you were acting all strange. And then, after we put into Severomorsk, I saw how different everything was. You told us we had gone to the past—right into the middle of WWII! Who could believe that? But that’s when the dreams started. Only they weren’t dreams, were they Fedorov. They were memories. I was remembering all this crap, only it started in my sleep. Now I’ve got on that goddamned French Cologne!”

Fedorov smiled. “You mean *Déjà vu*? Yes, I suppose you do. Don’t worry Chief, you still smell like a pig.”

The big Chief gave him a wide grin. “You’re all right, Fedorov. I don’t know why I was so pissed at you. Karpov was the one who put me up to that again. He said I was supposed to spy on you—see what you were up to. You mean to say that he’s the same Karpov we sailed with in the beginning?”

“Right.” Fedorov didn’t want to get into the doppelganger thing with Orlov now. It was enough that he was slowly getting a grip on himself, and settling down.

“Then Karpov took the ship after all. Is that what happened when you went ashore at Severomorsk? He left the ship, but came back all strange. That bastard got rid of Volsky, didn’t he.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. But the Admiral got away on a British sub. He was with Admiral Tovey on *Invincible*... before he died.”

“Right,” said Orlov, suddenly missing the Admiral. “Fedorov... It’s been you and Volsky against Karpov all along, hasn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” said Fedorov sullenly.

“But how is it you remembered things—hell—how can I be remembering all this shit, but no one else does?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that those memories are real. They happened. Frankly, I thought I was going crazy myself, but now that you remember it all, I know I’m still sane. Were together in all this, you and I. Thank god someone else remembers everything.”

“Karpov too,” Orlov said darkly. “What do we do with him?”

“Nothing—at least for now.”

“What? You going to let him ride roughshod over the whole ship and crew like this? What’s he doing here now? He’s fighting his little war, just

like he wanted to in the Atlantic. The next thing you know he'll be firing off a nuke."

"Not if I can help it. Look Orlov, you mustn't let Karpov know you remember any of this. Understand? He'd put all his security men on you, or worse. He'd have Grilikov on your ass every minute of the day. No. You have to lay low on this now. I had the same choice to make in the beginning. I laid low, and tried to figure out what to do. I was looking for allies, trying to figure who I could get to support my position. But Karpov found me out, so I decided to play along. He offered me *Starpom* to cooperate with him. I figured it was better than the brig. What could I do there? At least this way I have some say on what happens. He listens to me, seeks my advice."

"Right, the two of you have been thick as thieves on the bridge. Look Fedorov. I can keep my mouth shut, but if Karpov figured out you knew things, he'll be on to me in no time. Hell, you're one clever little bastard yourself. He saw through your act, so what chance does that give me?"

"I know, I know," Fedorov held up a hand. "But at least you need to play it that way for now. If he finds out you know everything, I'll stand with you, Orlov. I'll do everything I can to protect you."

Orlov gave him a good long look. "You're a good man, Fedorov. I always thought that, even when I was busting your balls. Alright, so what happens when Karpov figures this all out?"

"We'll deal with that later."

"Yes? Well maybe we should get to the bastard before he learns anything more."

"I don't think that would be wise. It was the same problem I faced when I thought I was alone on the ship—the only man who remembered anything. I realized that I might work quietly, behind the scenes, find allies like Zolkin, or Nikolin—men I knew who stood with me before."

"Troyak," said Orlov gruffly. "That's who we need. Troyak and that clown Zykov and all the Marines."

"I thought that at first too, but listen. Karpov brought on all those security men—his personal guard from Siberia. I knew the last thing I wanted was a nice little civil war here on the ship. Can you imagine it? It would eventually come to gun play, and a lot of blood spilled. I couldn't allow that, Chief. These men are all my brothers. I couldn't set one side against another like that."

“Well shit, we could at least figure a way to get Grilikov and those black coated bastards off the ship.”

“Yes, but that may take some doing, and I don’t think violence is our answer. We’ve got to play this very carefully, Chief. If Karpov finds out what you know, you need to let me handle that with him. Understand? I know you carry a pretty heavy grudge with that man, but you’ve got to step up now, and get beyond that. I need you to find another man in you now. You are still Chief of the Boat. You need to become that man, and not the surly disciplinarian who delighted in knocking heads together below decks. All those men are our brothers. They fought with us, endured everything we went through, lost everything we lost when all this happened. We’ve got to take care of them. Who knows, one day they may remember things that happened before, just like you did here. But for now, don’t say anything to anyone about this. Keep it entirely between you and I. If Karpov finds out, let me handle it. Then we’ll take things from there.”

Orlov nodded. “Alright Fedorov. I’m with you on this one. Now I’m *your* spy!” He grinned.

“Good for you. But don’t get careless. Go about your regular routine, make your reports as always, fart out loud like you do in the mess hall. Just be your old self. Remember, we’re still here in the middle of WWII. In some ways, Karpov is not the monster you think he is. Yes, he’s ruthless, determined, but he’s working a plan to undo the damage he caused when he took the ship back to 1908. We just took Kamchatka, and now he’s trying to get back Sakhalin Island, Primorskiy Province, and even Vladivostok.”

“Right, this is some real strange doings here now, eh Fedorov? How’d the Japanese get their hands on Vladivostok?”

“That’s a real long story, but Karpov had a lot to do with it, and now he’s trying to set things right. That was one other reason I decided to handle things the way I did.”

“Still trying to fix everything?”

“You might say so. It may be futile in the end, but I can still try. The way I see it now is that I at least have some input on what happens—some pull. But god knows I wish we still had Admiral Volsky here with us.”

“Right,” said Orlov. “I suppose he’s the only one who does know what’s going on in this crazy world.”

“Volsky?”

“God...”

Fedorov nodded silently.

Chapter 12

Chief Dobrynin was listening to the reactors, as he often did. The hum and vibration all held meaning, carried a message, told him much of the inner workings of the system. It had been months now since he ran his regular rod maintenance rotation. He didn't quite know why, but orders had come down that the procedure should be discontinued, and that the spare control rod, Number 25, should be removed from the reactor assembly and stored in a radiation safe container.

That procedure was largely automated by 2021. All he had to do was retract the rod upwards into a long metal tube that opened on one side to admit the container. The rod would slide up, a servo mechanism would close the lower container hatch, and then it would be safe for maintenance crews to remove the container, store the rod, or mount another in its place.

He thought about that order, wondering why it had been given, and feeling just a little odd about it. All the equipment under his watch was like a family for him. He counted his monitors, gauges and tools like an old man might count his grand children. It was as if he had some long affiliation with Number 25, which had fit quietly into the matrix of his complex life in the engineering plant until that fateful day—yes, the day he ran the routine just before those live fire exercises. That was when they had the trouble with K-266, the *Orel*. The submarine had been scheduled to test fire a small missile barrage, but something went terribly wrong.

After that, the chaos of everything that had happened to them was still difficult to believe. Yet he dealt with it, like all the other men on the ship, and being a senior officer, he saw it as his duty to set an example for those under him. So he simply returned to the work he had been trained for, the job he did so very well there as Chief Engineer. He kept to his routine, kept the men working as always, and still quietly listened to his equipment.

Everything seemed normal, as it always did, for he ran a very tight watch—until he heard something one day, an odd sub-harmony in one of the reactors. He had been listening, eyes closed, his mind taking the errant vibrations and whirring thrums and weaving them into some kind of inner symphony. There he sat, just like a conductor, a man who knew exactly what

he was supposed to be hearing in the score being played. He knew, with each sound, what should come next, be it the deep murmur of a water flow pump, or the lilting whine of a steam rotor. Each sound should be followed by another, just like the notes in the score, but here was a note, a line of music, that he had never heard before.

Dobrynin inclined his head, suddenly more alert, listening... listening... Something in the sound seemed to pull at him, triggering some deep inner sense, a sixth sense that was a strange collaboration of touch, smell, and sound. Together they combined to produce a new sensory suite in him, and it was there, in that intersection of the three senses, that he sensed something different playing in the orchestra that he did not expect, yet something he was inwardly certain he had heard before. It was a sound, a feeling, a vague yet palpable presence in the system, and now he opened his eyes, seeing out the nearest monitor to add sight to the mix of senses he was using.

“Mister Markov,” he said quietly. “Kindly bring up the flow channel report on monitor number two please.”

“Aye, Chief. Number two.”

Dobrynin shifted his weight in his chair, leaning to one side, closing his eyes again briefly and listening. As if aware that it had been discovered, the errant sound had fled. He waited, thinking it would return again in the very next phrase, the next bar in the score, but nothing was heard. Yet the recollection of that sound was clear in his mind, and it touched a very deep chord somewhere within him. He had heard this before, many times, and it never promised good things when it came.

Yes, he had heard that sound before, and it stood now in his mind like a harbinger of something more profound that was yet to come, a quiet precursor, a little foreshock, a warning.

“Mister Markov. I want to print a reading on the entire system for the last ten minutes.”

“A reading? You mean a diagnostic report?”

“That is correct.”

“The entire system, sir?”

“Full diagnostic. Get started please. Call in Mister Garin as well if you need some help. I want it done as soon as possible.”

“Very good, sir.”

Dobrynin smiled, seeing Markov swivel in his seat, looking for a

clipboard, lists of things he would need to get printed reports on for the diagnostic. He was a good man, a competent technician, yet as Dobrynin looked at him, a strange feeling came over him. Markov... missing... Gone....

He shook his head, not knowing why he thought that. It was just another of those strange inner hunches that he was prone to, but the Chief had learned to pay attention to such things, quiet little upwellings of his unconscious mind. Pay attention, he told himself. Keep a good eye and ear on things. Something isn't quite right here, and you know it. It may be nothing serious, like a loose shoestring in the system as a whole, but then again....

He leaned back, closed his eyes, and listened....

* * *

Another man was listening, sitting in a cellar deep beneath the administration room at Pearl Harbor. The building above had been gutted by fire, but the cellar housing Station HYPO had survived. In the last three months the rubble had been cleared, new construction started, and it was nearly complete. Yet all the while, the station, a branch of OP-20-G Naval Intelligence section in Washington DC, had continued to operate. Their mission was signals intelligence and decryption, and they had some very talented minds there, including one Lieutenant Commander Joseph Rochefort, who had joined the Navy while still in high school in 1918. A man with a complex mind, much like Alan Turing, Rochefort delighted in solving crossword puzzles, or analyzing the possibilities of card games, particularly bridge. It was the kind of mind that was tailor made for code breaking, and that is what Rochefort did.

Station HYPO, sometimes called Fleet Radio Unit Pacific (FRUPAC), had a sister station labeled FRUMEL in Melbourne, and together they had been listening... listening.... All the real decryption work was piling up at those two sites now, as Hong Kong was gone, along with Batavia, and Corregidor. They took the burden, and worked hard, and had some real success in breaking the Japanese JN-25B naval code. Now it was telling them some very dangerous things.

Orders were afoot, signals traffic up all across the bands, and ships were on the move. This made for late hours and long shifts at HYPO, but slowly, a

rather ominous picture was being painted by the signals traffic. Lieutenant Commander Jasper Holmes had been very methodical, working from the assumption that something was up for the Central Pacific. The Americans had learned that the movement and deployment of the Japanese carriers was the first thing to look for, and they had clearly identified a carrier with a name ending in “kaku” ordered to Truk. Only two ships had that suffix, and they were both in the same Carrier Division, Number 5, Japan’s newest and most modern carriers.

Holmes came up to Rochefort’s desk, the green eye shades the men used to protect their eyes from the endless overhead fluorescent lighting now perched high on his forehead. He had caught a few hours sleep on a cot by the wall, then was up early to see if anything new had come in. He was very pleasantly surprised. Rochefort was sitting behind a wall of stacked file folders and reports, half way through a cup of coffee. A veil of pipe smoke always seemed to surround his desk, like fog hugging the ragged shore of some isolated Pacific island.

“If Div Five has moved to Truk,” said Rochefort, “what makes you think they’re heading for the Central Pacific?”

“Truk is the center of the wheel,” said Holmes. “From there they could head south into the Solomons, or southwest towards the Coral Sea. There are good objectives there. We know they want Port Moresby. That’s why Fletcher has *Saratoga* and *Yorktown* off Fiji right now, ready to move west into the Coral Sea. They could save him the trouble and also head right for Fiji from Truk, and that has a lot of folks worried. So I decided to play a little game.”

“A game?”

“Right. We know the call names of several objectives, so I put out some traffic on the radio last week, just an innocuous little laundry list of maintenance trouble, and I sent it in the clear. I had the report say they had trouble with the water condenser on Midway, and needed lubricating oil for a crane at Suva Bay—two nice fat objectives the Japs might be eyeing now. And guess what. We picked up a message just yesterday. The Japs took my bait, hook, line, and sinker!” His smile drove the weariness from the lines of his face.

“What do you mean?”

“A.F. sir, that was one of the call signs attached to an objective point. We

picked up a message repeating that A.F. had trouble with its water condenser. I decoded it myself. So A.F. has to be Midway, and by elimination, we figured out what Fiji must be. No action there, but everything else seems to be pointing to Midway. We even picked up movement order for fleet unit 8 O K.I. We know what that is sir, because the Japs always pair sister ships, and 9 O K.I. was clearly ordered to Kwajalein right after the attack on Pearl. That was *Kaga*, the ship Halsey busted up in that first engagement. So 8 O K.I. has to be the *Akagi*, and they want it ready for a move to support the operations for A.F—for Midway.” He folded his arms, a smug look of satisfaction on his face.

“Midway,” said Rochefort. “Why the Central Pacific?”

“Unfinished business,” said Holmes. “If they can knock off Midway, then we lose that important watch on all that turf out there.”

“Or maybe something else,” said Rochefort. “Know thine enemy, Holmes. We know Yamamoto has been wanting to lock horns with our carriers for some time. That’s his guiding principle—seek out a decisive engagement. That’s why he hit us at Pearl.”

“Right. Well I think they’re going to sortie into the central Pacific, and take a pot shot at Midway. They know Halsey has been nipping at the Marianas, and that stunt Doolittle pulled off must have reddened quite a few faces in the navy over there. If they had Midway, they could put seaplanes there and we would have never been able to pull that raid off. It’s a big blind spot for them out there, and possession of Midway solves that problem nicely.”

“How sure are you about this?”

“Well, we’ve also got Nagumo’s call sign—that was 8 E YU, before they changed it to 8 YU NA. We have sixteen readings where that call sign is paired with the 8 O K.I. for the *Akagi*. So that has to be the flagship for this operation, and they’re moving it to Truk to link up with Carrier Division 5. That’ll give them at least three big flattops ready to move in five days. And there’s more, we’ve got the handle for one of their fleet replenishment ships, *Kyukuto Maru*. It’s the flagship for the tanker fleet. It’s got orders to proceed to support this operation A.F. too.”

“Have you run this by anyone else?”

“Rear Admiral Layton, and he thinks it’s good. He wanted me to get this to you right away.”

“What about Tommy Dyer?”

“I’ll get to him next. I wanted you to see this first hand.”

Rochefort thought for a moment. “Let me look over those traffic decrypts. A lot is riding on this, and we need to get our ducks lined up perfectly. Did you put these latest ship movements up on the big board yet?”

Holmes was in charge of tracking all ship movements, and he had rigged out a large plotting board on the wall where he would update positions on all the key players in this complex game of chess in the Pacific.

“Find anything else we’ve got on A.F. See if you can cross reference anything. I think the file is under that box there.” Rochefort pointed to a clutter of boxes and stacks of paperwork surrounding one of the other desks like a coral reef. Each man sat on his private little island, with mountains of file folders and jungles of paperwork. They never did set up any proper filing system, but there was a hidden order to the apparent chaos, and just like that, Rochefort could point to a box on the floor and know the A.F. ship track file was tucked away beneath it. Many of the men there had near photographic memory for things like that. To them the clutter was like a road map or navigation chart, and they could read it unerringly.

“So you figure this is what they called off the Indian Ocean thing for?” Rochefort scratched his head.

“They had 5th Carrier Division all set to move that way after Java, but then that volcano popped off and that was that.”

“I don’t blame them,” said Rochefort. He leaned back, taking a short drag on his pipe.

“Sir,” said Holmes. “We know what they want. It’s either Milne Bay and Moresby in the Coral Sea, the lower Solomons—probably the anchorage at Tulagi, and then something big has been in the works after that, and for a good long while.”

“Right,” said Rochefort. “Marines are already working up plans for Tulagi. But these carrier movements are another thing altogether. You figure they’d move with only three?”

“I’m watching the light stuff too, sir. I’ve got a line on *Zuiho*, *Shoho*, and *Ryujo*—that’s the CVE they used in the Sumatra-Java invasion. They pulled that ship east to Rabaul, and whatever was left of that covering force off Java. Everything is shifting that way, and the buildup at Truk is looking pretty mean.”

“Nothing on Fiji?”

“Not a peep. Not a whisper. That would be a third of fourth down objective for any drive they run now.”

“Alright. Get me the intercepts. I want to look things over before we go to Nimitz with this, but we’ll have to move soon. *Enterprise* and *Hornet* made it back to Pearl, and they’ll have to get to sea fast if you’re right about this.”

“Leave it to me sir!” Holmes snapped off a quick salute and then hurried off through the archipelago of desks and file boxes, destination unknown.

Rochefort settled back in his chair, his eye on a map. Big Five was already at Truk with *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*. Now Nagumo was shipping in on the *Akagi*, and with the number one fleet tanker in the mix. *Yamato* was at Davao, and coast watchers there said there was quite a show put on there—something about rockets being fired off. Probably flares or signal rockets, he thought. You had to be careful with some of these native coastwatcher types. You’d get in a report that sounded crazy at first—a large bird reportedly landing on a ship at sea, which immediately sunk from the heavy weight. That nonsense soon became the landing of a seaplane rendezvousing with a Japanese submarine, which then submerged.

Well, we thought *Yamato* was heading home, but that ship turned for Truk last week as well. Holmes says the Japs fell for his little ruse hook, line and sinker, but who’s the real fisherman here? Yamamoto doesn’t fool around when it comes to big ship movements like this. I’ll tell you what, there are two types of fisherman—those who fish for sport, and those who fish for fish. Yamamoto is looking to land something real big here. Yes, something is up... something real big.

Part V

Developments

“I have added these principles to the law of chess: get the Knights into action before both Bishops are developed.”

— Emanuel Lasker

Chapter 13

Warrant Flying Officer Nobuo Fujita had been a very busy man of late, rightfully claiming the undisputed title of *Kantai no me*, the ‘Eyes of the Fleet.’ He was first called ‘the other Fujita,’ though he was no relation to the now famous Mitsuo Fujita who led the attack at Pearl Harbor. Nobuo had been in on that operation, assigned as the float plane pilot for the submarine I-25, though he had been disappointed when his plane failed to start on the eve of that momentous day. So only one Fujita claimed any laurels on the opening day of the war, but the other Fujita had been feverishly busy ever since, as if he was out to write his name in the history of these events, come what may.

The I-25 was a curious boat, with a canopy that enclosed a watertight “hanger” of sorts just forward of the conning tower. It was just big enough to house a slightly disassembled Yokosuka E14Y float plane, which was mainly used at night for search and reconnaissance operations. The sub would lurk submerged by day, creeping about at the sedate speed of eight or nine knots, but after sunset, it could surface and speed off at up to 23 knots to perform its primary role as a fleet scouting unit.

After the disappointment of Pearl Harbor, the sub tussled with shipping off the coast of Oregon before returning to Kwajalein. Then, on its second wartime patrol, it was sent to the deep South Pacific to take a look at the buildup that might be underway in Allied controlled ports. Fujita had brazenly scouted Sidney, Melbourne, Hobart, and then I-25 cruised over to have a look at New Zealand. There he carefully noted the buildup of troops arriving at Wellington and Auckland, some of the first ports to receive the new arrivals from the United States. Word then came that one final stop was to be added to the mission—Fiji.

Out on the exposed deck just after sunset, he worked with two other men to quickly get the wings mounted properly, and check the undercarriage. The engine had been running smoothly in all these recon operations, and he had every hope that his mission over Suva Bay would be routine. At that time, Fujita did not know of the big operation planned for Fiji. The stratospheric clouds of high level strategy seldom rained on his pay grade. He was simply

out to conduct one of his stealthy night recon sweeps, and see what the Allies might have cooking in the harbor there.

What he saw instead that night came as quite an unexpected surprise. He had been drifting through a roll of low clouds, emerging over a wide swath of moonlit water, when he clearly saw the dark shapes of ships off his three o'clock heading. And these were not just any ships, the long flat decks and characteristic island superstructures immediately told him they were aircraft carriers—two of them, surrounded by several cruiser class ships and a gaggle of destroyers.

Nobuo Fujita had just spotted TF-11 under Admiral Fletcher, and the two carriers he was eyeing were the *Yorktown* and *Saratoga*. The latter was not yet present in Fedorov's history. Its sister ship, the *Lexington*, would have taken this watch, but that ship was already deep in Davey Jones Locker. Fletcher had come in with the *Yorktown* as TF-17, and *Saratoga* was in TF-11, but now, after refueling from tankers on site, both TFs were about to unite into one battlegroup—Taffy 11.

Fujita got quite an eyeful that night, lingering just long enough to take careful note of probable ship types. He counted two carriers, at least seven cruisers, and eight destroyers before sliding away into those clouds, grateful they were there to mask his retreat to the I-25. The signal he would send out that day would bounce from that sub, to the 4th Fleet Headquarters in Rabaul, and then to Combined Fleet Headquarters in Truk. The American carriers had been found, and Fujita had the first real feather of the war in his cap as he walked in his namesake's shadow.

He would later do one more thing that would get him some ink in the ledger of these events. Operating off the US coast in a later patrol, Fujita would fly deep into the Cascades of Oregon, and drop a pair of incendiary bombs with the intention of starting a forest fire. That plan would fail, though the bombing raid itself would be the first, and perhaps the last aerial raid ever mounted on the Continental United States during the war. That distinction would go to Nobuo Fujita, but in the overall scheme of things, the sighting he had just made would weigh far heavier on the scales of time and fate, and for a very odd reason. A Warrant Officer on a sub that had been at sea for over a month might be one of the last people in the long chain of command to get notice of things like the order to move to Naval Code Book C, effective April 10, 1942. They didn't have a copy of that new book yet on the I-25, so the

signal Fujita would send went out using the old code, Book B.

* * *

It was a full 48 hours later before Yamamoto actually was informed of the sighting. Admiral Ugaki came in, somewhat breathless from the long climb up four decks into *Yamato's* high conning section. The fleet had been assembling at Truk, with Carrier Division 5 reporting three days ago, refueling, and then immediately putting out to sea again for the first phase of the operation. Today the arrival of the newly refitted *Akagi* would complete the strike forces available in theater. *Kaga* was still back in Japan, her damage heavier than the minor hit on the *Akagi*, so that ship would sit the battle out in the shipyards. *Tosa* was to have also joined the fleet at Truk, but Admiral Nagano had been worried about the Siberians, so it was retained in home waters as well. This left four fleet carriers, and three more lighter escort carriers available for Operation FS.

“Admiral, we have a sighting report off submarine I-25. The American carriers have been spotted south of Fiji!”

Yamamoto looked up from his desk, clearly interested. “How many carriers?”

“Two definite, with a strong escort of cruisers and destroyers. It was a night sighting, so there was no word as to ship ID on the carriers.”

“That does not matter. When was the sighting made?”

“I’m afraid that’s the problem. The report is already nearly 48 hours old. It was sent from the I-25 using Code Book B, but someone had the presence of mind to find and use Book C at Rabaul when they passed it on here.”

Yamamoto considered that. “Even at only 18 knots,” he said, “this task force could be over 800 nautical miles from the reported sighting location. And while it is understandable that our submarine might not yet have the updated code books, the fact that this signal was sent in a version we know has been compromised also presents a problem. The Americans may have intercepted it, and in that case, they would know we spotted them.”

“Perhaps they are forming to oppose Operation MO,” said Ugaki.” That was Phase One of the overall Operation FS, the Port Moresby Operation. “If there is any part of our planning they might be privy to, it would be this opening move towards Port Moresby.”

“In that case,” said Yamamoto, “these carriers could have moved 800 miles west by now, right into the Coral Sea. It will be necessary to make certain Admiral Inoue has alerted Carrier Division 5. They should be entering the Coral Sea as we speak.”

“They will be more than capable of handling the situation,” said Ugaki.

“Perhaps, but here we sit with the FS Invasion group, and the newest addition to our fleet out there in the lagoon. It was my hope that *Takami* would be present for any engagement with the Americans. Then we might actually see if this ship can do all that it promises.”

“The Sakaguchi Detachment is ready to board transports for Noumea. We could take the fleet out in support of that mission, and it might get us into this fight,” said Ugaki, an eager light in his eye. “After we deliver our charge to Noumea, we would also be in a good position to move north when 48th Division is formed up and ready to move on Fiji. Hopefully, this business in the Coral Sea will have concluded before that, and we can proceed with the main operation.”

Yamamoto nodded, but he was not so confident. It was as if he could feel the impending shadow that fell on Japanese Naval operations at this time. The brief hour he had spent in that library aboard *Takami* had been very sobering.

We wanted Port Moresby, and they stopped us, he thought. I wanted Midway, and they crushed us there. We wanted Tulagi and Guadalcanal, and they took hold of us by the throat and did not let go until our breath was cut off and the last starving remnants of our forces there made that ignominious withdrawal. Three battles, three defeats, not to mention the little incident at Milne Bay, where we were stopped yet again, this time by the Australians.

Up until now, we have been virtually invincible. Yet this battle that could soon be joined in the Coral Sea begins to take on the eerie tinge of that shadow. Carrier Division 5 is alone to face two American Carriers.

“Don’t you see what is happening here?” he said with an edge of warning. “This is the battle that truculent officer spoke of in the Coral Sea. Here I sit with *Akagi*, and *Soryu*, ready to cover the movement of our support convoy to Noumea, but too far north to get into this fight. *Zuiho*, and *Shoho* are in the Shortlands supporting the Tulagi Operation, and then they were to stand as close support for the MO operation. *Ryujo* will be sent towards Midway as part of the ruse we have planned. Where might the other American carriers be

now? This Lieutenant Commander Fukada tells me they will be no closer than Midway, at least according to what he knows.”

“Yet can I trust the shadows of these events as they were written up in those books? They have already told me things here are different from the history they claim to know. How very strange all this is now. I have decided there will be no battle of Midway this spring. So what does that mean for the remainder of the history chronicled in that library. It becomes no more than a fiction, while I sit here, about to rewrite all the events yet to come in this war. How very strange....”

“That sighting report is very stale and, if it was intercepted, the Americans will be aware that they have been located. So where would they go? That will depend on how much they really know about our operational planning. Something tells me they know about Operation MO, but do they also know of our planned move against Fiji? Our planned reinforcement of Noumea? Both operations would seem easy enough to predict.”

“There is one other thing,” said Ugaki. “Due to the presence of those carriers, the seaplane off I-25 was unable to proceed to Suva Bay as planned. So we do not have a current update on the enemy strength there. Therefore, the Army believes it is advisable to move at least two regiments of the 48th Division to Fiji in the first wave instead of only one.”

“Are they ready at Rabaul?”

“Abe’s 47th Regiment and Tanaka’s 2nd Formosa Regiment are already there. It is only a question of arranging shipping, as the transports that delivered Tanaka must return to Java for the 1st Formosa Regiment. We will have enough at Rabaul to lift one regiment as planned. The Abe detachment was scheduled to board tonight. However, I must communicate with 17th Army Headquarters to see what the requirements are to lift a second regiment.”

Yamamoto scratched his eyebrow, breathing deeply. “This operation is scheduled to begin tomorrow, and suddenly the Army changes its mind, and here we are scrambling for adequate shipping.”

“The losses off Java contributed to that,” said Ugaki. “Over a dozen transports were lost in the eruption and subsequent tsunami. We are moving additional shipping down from the Philippines, but it will take a few days. Considering that, I have an alternate plan. Should there be any delay in getting additional shipping to Rabaul, we can merely substitute the Sakaguchi

detachment for that second regiment. It is here in Truk, and already scheduled for the run to Noumea. Then, as shipping becomes available, the Tanaka Detachment of the 48th Division can go to Noumea in place of Sakaguchi's troops."

"Will the Army agree to that?"

"This is what I will discuss with 17th Army Headquarters."

"All these plans," said Yamamoto. "We string them out like webs, but where is the spider I-25 spotted nearly two days ago? Soon we will have the bulk of all our available troops in theater at sea, and we do not know where those two carriers went, or even if they might remain in the waters near Fiji. If so, then we may wish to combine both 2nd and 5th Carrier Divisions before we move east."

"A wise precaution," said Ugaki.

"But yet we do not know if 5th Carrier Division might be engaged if the Americans do challenge Operation MO."

"Sir, we have *Takami*. If their claims can be believed, then their radar and sonar should be able to locate these enemy carriers if they remain anywhere near the Fiji Islands. In my judgment, it should be safe to proceed to Fiji with the 2nd Carrier Division alone."

"One minute you tell me it would be wise to combine our fleet carrier divisions. in the next you tell me we should leave them operating as separate groups. Admiral, which is it?"

"That is a question I might best answer in another 48 hours. By that time, the MO operation will be well underway. If the Americans have moved west to attempt to oppose us there, we should know that soon. And sir, if that is the case, then we could cover the Fiji invasion transports with a close support group build around *Zuiho* and *Shoho* in the Shortlands. That would leave our 2nd Carrier Division free to swing south behind the American carriers."

"I see you have considered every eventuality," said Yamamoto, "but battle has a way of creating circumstances that may not be easily remedied. Very well, if the Army agrees, then we will order the Sakaguchi Regiment to board transports tonight as well. It will support the Fiji landings as you suggest, and Tanaka's troops can reinforce Noumea later."

Ugaki proffered a shallow bow, and was off to see to his business with the 17th Army. Yet the unsettled nature of all these last minute developments left Yamamoto feeling a thrum of anxiety. That shadow... the loss of nerve in the

attempt to take Port Moresby... that unexpected defeat of not two, but all four fleet carriers I might have sent to attack Midway.... Will the Americans take the bait we have cast into the sea regarding that objective? Where are the rest of their carriers? And what about Guadalcanal? According to those books, that is where the Americans will strike us first. Can I believe that, or is this history destined to spin off in another direction? My decisions may have everything to do with answering that, but here I sit, with knowledge that I might never have had otherwise, and I can see now that it acts as much as a poison in the brew of my deliberations as anything else.

That officer on the *Takami* made it all sound so certain. He would simply destroy the American carrier aircraft, and that would be that. But to do that we must first find those carriers, not only the two birds we had in hand a few days ago, but also the remainder of their mobile forces. How quickly could they turn them around and get them back out to sea? This is where our ruse in putting out all that radio traffic concerning Midway may be the key factor. If they believe it, then those remaining carriers might stay well out in the Central Pacific. In that instance, the Coral Sea is ours.

Chapter 14

Nobuo Fujita had discovered a glittering prize beneath him on the night of April 4th, 1942, but what he had failed to see was the rapid buildup of Allied forces on the primary objective of Yamamoto's plan. All through the early months of the war, beginning with the *Pensacola* Convoy, there had been a steady flow of troopships and convoys departing from New York, San Francisco and San Diego. Ships like the *Queen Mary*, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Monterey*, *Hammondsport*, and *Matsonia* brought elements of the 32nd and 23rd Divisions, along with coastal defense battalions, AA regiments, and pursuit squadrons with crated P-39 and P-40 fighters.

Fiji was the closest friendly port to Australia, presently garrisoned by two Brigades of infantry from New Zealand, and a battalion of Fiji Commandos raised from native troops. These troops had been busy improving defenses, port facilities and extending runways on the airfields to accommodate the new tenants soon to arrive from America. The *Pensacola* Convoy was the first, diverted there briefly before continuing on to Australia. The next major force to come would have been designated "Poppy Force," as Poppy was the US codename for New Caledonia. It would have carried elements that became the "Americal Division," as that name was created by calling the unit the "American New Caledonian Division," where it was to be posted. But in this telling of events, those troops were now being called Fantan Force, as this was the US codename for "Fortress Fiji."

Fantan Force would see the delivery of the 132nd, 164th and 182nd Infantry Regiments, along with a patchwork of other artillery, engineer and AA units, all under the command of Brigadier General Alexander M. Patch. This odd basket of forces was soon quilted together to form a division that would get a new nickname this time around, the "Pacifica Division," but among army regulars on the scene the unit was simply called "Patch Force."

It was a haphazard affair, with units originating in different ports, and some showing up at the wharves without properly crating their heavy equipment. Clueless stevedores stared slack jawed at an AA regiment that arrived with all its weapons mounted and being towed by trucks. No one had told them it all had to be crated, and even if it had been, the fine art of combat

loading had not yet dawned in the minds of the inexperienced cargo handling crews. So the ships would be loaded in a real jumble of crates and bins, and it was sheer chance if a unit would arrive to find any of its heavy weapons available upon landing. This was going to hamper unit effectiveness, but the sheer mass of men and equipment arriving at Suva Bay would be something the enemy had not anticipated.

The Japanese Army planners had been wise to double down on the first wave of their planned invasion of Fiji, because they were going to face some very steep odds. Even though Patch Force would be a relatively green force, fresh off the boat, it would be a full division, strongly reinforcing the two Kiwi Brigades already on the island. Those troops were scheduled to go home, but as fate would have it, the shipping was not available to move them this early. So the Japanese troops assigned to Operation FS would be outnumbered nearly three to one.

Marine units had also been assigned for Fiji, but they had been diverted to American Samoa. There, on the island of Tutuila, the US possessed one of the largest natural harbors in the Pacific at Pago Pago, which was a collapsed volcanic caldera surrounded by steep ridges that rose to lofty peaks, which the US service troops called the “Rainmaker Mountains.” The first Marine units were settling in, a Raider Battalion and a specially trained Parachute Battalion. They were awaiting stronger forces from the US, which would include the entire 1st Marine Division, four regiments strong, and reinforced by an additional regiment of the 2nd Marine Division.

Far from being a hastily mounted defensive unit to garrison these valuable island outposts, the Marines would become America’s shock troops, there to spearhead planned counteroffensives that were already being spawned in the minds of Nimitz and MacArthur. When they did come, the transports would see them loaded for bear, and planning to mount an immediate amphibious offensive. That had happened in August of 1942 in the old history, and it remained to be seen whether Vandegrift’s Marines would play a part in the drama that was about to unfold.

In Fedorov’s history, they had shipped out of Oakland on the West Coast, all bound for New Zealand, with the exception of the 7th Regiment, which would go to Pago Pago. Once in those ports, they would off load, then reload for combat operations before sailing to Fiji to rendezvous with other division elements arriving from different local ports. Yet the entire sector around Fiji

was soon about to become an active combat zone, so these plans would all be drastically affected. Operation FS was going to place powerful Japanese naval forces right astride all the shipping lanes the Allies used to prepare for their first offensive operations. Instead, they were about to be thrown onto the defense in the final act of Japan's whirlwind offensive to the south.

Yamamoto's deliberations were very well considered, but the ruse the Japanese had planned regarding Midway would end up causing them trouble. Convinced that they had identified Midway with the code handle A.F., the Americans took the threat very seriously.

* * *

With the Halsey group just back from the Doolittle Raid, this meant they now had every reason to quickly replenish and sortie those carriers for possible action near Midway—and this is what they did. Nimitz told Halsey that he was convinced the information coming out of HYPO was accurate.

"We've got them by the scruff of the neck now," he said. "So you get *Enterprise* and *Hornet* turned around and out to sea as soon as possible. Midway will be scouring the seas with every search plane we can give them."

"What about the Coral Sea Operation?" Halsey had also been briefed on the other intelligence they had concerning a planned enemy invasion of Port Moresby."

"Fletcher had *Saratoga* and *Yorktown* south of Fiji two days ago," said Nimitz. The snowy haired Admiral seemed tired, as though he had been up through many long nights of late, but there was still the light of battle in his eyes. "To be honest, I strongly considered reining Fletcher in and keeping him posted right there near Fiji. Port Moresby is just too exposed. The Japanese have the entire north east coast of New Guinea, and they've moved fighters to Lae. They can hit Moresby from Rabaul with their bombers, and the damn place is effectively deep in the enemy camp. The Bismarck Archipelago and their airfields make that approach impossible, and now that they've moved into the Solomons, it's as if they have a big wall built around the Coral sea."

"Aw hell," said Halsey in no uncertain terms. "It may look that way on a map, but that wall is paper thin. The same goes for their positions in the Marshalls and Gilberts. They moved in a few garrison companies, but there's

no significant air presence there now. All they have in the New Hebrides is Noumea, and for my money I'd sent Fletcher in to bust that place up."

"Well," said Nimitz. "Like I said, I almost pulled his chain, but I changed my mind. Moresby is too damn valuable to just let the Japs come in and take the place. If they do that, then getting up around Cape York to Darwin will be a very hazardous journey. That would mean Darwin might only be reached by sea from Perth, and even those convoys could be interdicted if the enemy builds up at Koepang on Timor. Otherwise, it's a pretty long haul across the outback to get anything to Darwin by land. So I sent Fletcher west two days ago, though I told him to give Noumea a pass. I want to keep this movement under wraps for as long as possible."

"Good enough," said Halsey. "Then you damn well won't want me sitting on my thumbs up near Midway. I say we get serious here, and take it right to the other fellow—show them we can still fight. I want to take *Enterprise* and *Hornet* right through the Marshalls and say hello along the way."

"You'll be spotted for sure if you do that."

"Exactly right. Look Admiral, they've got something cooking, and it's bigger than this Operation MO against Moresby. Hell, I'm no code and cypher man, but I can smell it. You said yourself that they're already moving into the Solomons. That's just as important as Moresby. If we let them get dug in there, and get airfields up and running, than that wall you spoke of earlier toughens up considerably. For now, I could punch right through it on my way to the Solomon Sea, and I'll knock a few heads together in the Marshalls before I get there."

"Don't forget Truk," Nimitz warned. "HYPO says they have good confidence that a fourth carrier slipped in there four days ago from Japan—the *Akagi*. That was Nagumo's flag when they hit us at Pearl."

"I've made the acquaintance," said Halsey sourly. "So all the better. It's time we settled the score for Pearl. I say we go right after them—sail right through their turf and raise hell. Sure, they'll know we're coming, and if they want to do anything about it, then bring it on."

Nimitz gave him a long look. He had already turned Fletcher loose with orders to get up to Moresby and hit the enemy any way he could. Now he had Halsey here, chafing at the bit to get into the fight. It was going to be dangerous—risky. His carriers would be operating independently, well out of supporting range of one another. Yet if Halsey was quick enough, the two

groups would be like the horns of a bull, Fletcher in the south, Halsey coming right through the Solomons, and both converging on the heart of this Operation MO.

“What if HYPO is correct and those carriers at Truk left for Midway yesterday?” He gave Halsey a searching look.

“Unless they swing well west of Wake Island I’ll find the bastards on my way to the Marshalls.”

“That’s what I’m worried about. We know they had the 5th Carrier Division at Truk last week. Now they’ve added two more fleet carriers. You know how they like to operate. They hit us with everything they had at Pearl, so what if you run into all four of those enemy carriers. You’d be outnumbered two to one.”

“Hell that doesn’t mean a thing. I was outnumbered three to one at Pearl and I still went after them there.”

“And we lost *Lexington*...” Nimitz didn’t mean for that to come out as it did, and he was quick to say so. “Look Bull, you did what you could at Pearl, and thank god we hurt them too—put two of their carriers in dry-dock, and that counted for a lot. But we can’t trade the Japs carrier for carrier now—not yet. I’ve had to move mountains to get hold of the *Wasp* and it’s due in at Pearl today.”

“Good,” said Halsey. “Sent it to Midway—and send me to shake things up down there, because those flattops could have just as easily moved south from Truk. We have no hard evidence aside from signals traffic that they’re coming for Midway.”

“HYPO says they got a good signal decode on orders for one of their light carriers to head that way—*Ryujo*. It could be the tip of the spear.”

“All the more reason to turn me loose. Let me get down there and see what they really have cooking.”

“And if they do swing around Wake and come at Midway from the northwest?”

“Admiral, there’s a rudder on every one of my ships out there. You tell me Yamamoto is heading for Midway and I’ll turn on a dime. With *Wasp* in the equation the odds will look just a good deal better, won’t they. But until we know more than this business concerning A.F., I think we should take the initiative. You sent Fletcher—now send me.”

“Alright,” said Nimitz. “Have at ‘em. What do you propose?”

“I’m going to ring the doorbell in the Marshalls—take the fight to them before they can do the same to us. If they are heading east, then it’s because they want to mix it up with our carriers. Midway does them very little good, and we’ve made the place a pretty tough nut to crack out there. I say let them come. I’ll hit their bases in the Marshalls, and that includes Kwajalein, and from there I’ll be in a perfect position to either hit Truk or swing down into the Solomons and bust up that seaplane base they’re setting up at Tulagi. I plan on moving fast, and hitting hard. Woe betide anyone who sticks his nose in my business.”

Nimitz smiled. “Admiral,” he said with a grin. “You’ve got your marching orders. We’ll be in contact when you get down south and see if we can coordinate with Fletcher. Until then, you do exactly what you just said—and hit them hard.”

Halsey nodded. “What are you going to tell the boys over at HYPO?”

“That I sent you out to look for a fresh water condenser.” Nimitz smiled.

* * *

Halsey would not fail to make good on his boast. He had *Enterprise* and *Hornet* riled up and running southwest that very day, the crews still exuberant from their daring Doolittle Raid. Now they were out to hit the enemy again, this time in the Marshalls. The Japanese had put out tentative feelers there from their primary base at Kwajalein, and sent small garrisons to Wotje, Maloelap, and Eniwetok, and they were also looking over Tarawa atoll. Halsey intended to visit a few of these island outposts and ‘ring the doorbell’ as he had put it to Nimitz, while giving his pilots and planes a tune-up in the process.

The first island to feel his bite was Wotje, which was bombed and strafed, shaking up the small detachment there and setting back their plans for an airstrip considerably. But Yamamoto had a sixth sense about the Americans. He wasn’t sure that they would believe the Midway ruse, and knew that they had been making a determined effort to move troops and supplies to Australia and other nearby bases. So he ordered a pair of watchdogs to move east from Truk to sniff out the main enemy line of communications. The small hybrid scout carriers *Gozo* and *Mezu* were tagged for the job, and they were now sailing right into the thick of the storm Halsey was bringing, his eyes dark

and hard beneath those heavy bristling brows, his ceaseless energy driving hard through a light grey rain in the early morning hours of April 8th, 1942.

Chapter 15

While Nimitz and Halsey were steeling up for action, the Japanese offensive was already in motion. The 144th Regiment, now designated the South Seas Detachment, had boarded transports at a very busy and crowded harbor at Rabaul. Soon they were out into St George's Channel and around Cape Gazelle, heading for the Solomon Sea, but they were about to meet unexpected company. The Japanese had sent a group of four destroyers ahead of the invasion group to sweep that channel, but they missed something, an undetected US Submarine, S-47, lying in wait to make a bold attack.

The boat was on station, operating out of Brisbane with SubDiv 53, and a little earlier than the old history. In that story, she had trouble with a faulty firing circuit on her number four tube, passed some tense moments being hunted by destroyers and minesweepers, got off a plaintive shot at a lone transport, which rubbed salt in the wound after it missed. The steamer simply turned about and came right at the sub, forcing the boat to dive deep. By the time they got back up to have a look around, the transport had run off, leaving a frustrated Captain and crew, with no hits, and no laurels on their first wartime patrol.

Things would be different this time around, and strangely so. S-47 had been missed in the ASW sweep, and there, right before her hungry nose, came a line of doddering transports. Four torpedoes were fired in a nice spread, and as fate would have it, the number four fish would strike home. The firing circuit had stubbornly refused to fail in this history, and that tiny little component in an old sub laid down in 1921, was going to open the hostilities and draw first blood.

It was the troop transport *Aso Maru* that was in the line of fate that day, and the troops she was carrying were a rather elite bunch, the Kure 4th SNLF Battalion, assigned to make the first shock attack over the beaches at Port Moresby. They were going to be very late. That number four torpedo blasted into the side of the transport, and within minutes she was shipping water and foundering in the grey dawn. The escorting destroyers were quick on the scene, but old S-47 had taken her bite, and dove deep to lie low. By the time the boat surfaced again, the rest of the convoy had moved on, but *Aso Maru*

wasn't going to make it to Port Moresby, diverting to Gasmata instead, with a chance the hapless ship might not even make that port safely.

Captain James White Davis could see the oil slick, a tempting path to follow to see if he might finish off his prey. But he could also see the smoke from destroyer stacks on that same horizon, and being a careful man, he elected to continue his hunt elsewhere. The finicky circuit was going to matter in spite of that, for the 4th Kure SNLF would not make it to the invasion site. Word was quickly sent to Rabaul that they were trying to reach Gasmata, but there would be no transport there for the unit to continue the operation. So the Japanese were quickly casting off lines on two more transports, with orders to get to Rabaul with all speed.

Once the convoy rounded the cape near Milne bay and entered the Coral Sea, the Japanese plan called for the Nells based at Rabaul to shed their normal torpedo armament and take on bombs to get out after the airstrip at Port Moresby. The light carriers *Zuiho* and *Shoho* would also move in to assume their close air support role, the aim being to prevent any use of that field for Allied aircraft to molest the invasion force. Major General Horii of the South Seas Detachment was already missing his naval shock troops for the planned landing, and now he was quickly briefing his officers to prepare for the attack.

The Japanese had little to fear from Allied air power at Port Moresby. There were just a few Wirraway fighters there, waiting to take a regular pounding with a morning raid by those Nells, and then an afternoon follow-up off the two light carriers. The name of the fighter came from an Aboriginal word that meant 'Challenge', but there was little the Wirraways could do when the A6-M2 Zeros showed up. It was basically good for an all purpose trainer, but had no business in a fight with the nimble and deadly Japanese fighters. It was even outclassed by the older A5-M1 Claudes flying off *Zuiho*, and that was a fairly fitting condemnation.

When dawn came on the 8th of April, the Japanese would see their invasion convoy floating paravanes off the coral reefs of Port Moresby, something that had never happened in Fedorov's history books. Fletcher had been steaming west around Noumea, wary of the Japanese air squadrons posted there, and he was not going to reach the scene of the battle in time to stumble into what was once chronicled as the first Carrier to carrier duel of the war—the Battle of the Coral Sea. In this history, carriers had already

fought each other near the Hawaiian Islands, and a second time in the New Hebrides. Coral Sea would not be fought as it once was, but better late than never, Fletcher was still on his way—and so was Bull Halsey.

TF-16 had come barreling south into the Marianas, and true to his word, Halsey had stomped on the airfield at Wotje. He was about to mount a strike against Kwajalein when Scouting 6 reported what looked like a pair of small escort carriers south near Maloelap. They were, in fact, the two hybrid scout carriers, old converted cruisers with 8-inch guns forward and a small flight deck aft for one squadron of 12 planes.

The Japanese had chosen to put 12 Zeroes on the *Gozo*, and *Mezu* was following with 12 Kate Torpedo planes. Half of the fighters were up, and three of the B5Ns were out on patrol, but they were looking in the wrong direction. Ordered to scout the primary line of communications further east, that was what Captain Sujima on the *Mezu* was doing. Unfortunately, Halsey was well north of his position, approaching Rongelap in the Marshalls. Both *Enterprise* and *Hornet* had planes spotted and ready for action against the fledgling Japanese base at Maloelap when that sighting report came in: Two carriers, one destroyer, course 090 East, 40 miles north of Maloelap.

That was all Wade McClusky needed to hear. The word “carriers” resonated with both danger and excitement, and the *Enterprise* Group was quick of the deck that morning, and heading south. The six fighters of *GI-Choitai-Gozo* would put up a brave fight, six zeroes against 15 Wildcats escorting that strike. Pilot Warrant Officers Matsumura and Murakami would each get a kill in the fighter dual, and Murakami would slide off to make a good pass at the incoming Dauntless Dive bomber group, putting one down for the count.

Donald Runyon of VF-6 got behind one Zero and drilled it, sending the plane down with a long arc of smoke, and Flight Leader Jimmy Grey of the “Shooting Stars” would get another. There were 26 SBDs still in formation with McClusky when they broke through a puffy white cloud and saw the two carriers below. Down they went, and in spite of some rather wild defensive maneuvers made by the ships, the bombs were going to find both flight decks that morning. With so little flak coming up from the scouting group, the approach to the target was smooth and clear. *Gozo* would take the worst of it, with no fewer than five bomb hits amidships, just as the flight crews had finished bringing up another *Shotai* of three fighters.

The planes were caught in the heat and fire of the bomb explosions, with one Zero blown to pieces, a white wing careening wildly along the flight deck and cutting down two deck crewmen who were too late to the deck well to escape. One of the bombs penetrated to the hanger deck, exploding there to set off a raging fire where the last three Zeroes were being fueled. It was that fire that sealed the ship's fate, burning right through a buckled bulkhead and setting off the ready ammo magazine for the B-turret forward. That explosion blasted through to the main magazine, and *Gozo* simply blew up.

Aboard *Mezu*, only six B5Ns had managed to take off before the strike came in, and they had climbed to join the last four Zeroes off the *Gozo*. That formation of ten planes looked down on the thundering explosion that claimed the scout carrier's life, and the pilots tightened their jaws. They could see the American dive bombers pull out and head northwest, and they followed that heading, hoping to find the enemy and take just revenge. What they found instead was Lieutenant Merrill Cook's VF-8 off the *Hornet* flying CAP with 15 more Wildcats. Only three of the B5Ns would get anywhere near the targets, and no hits were scored. The remaining planes, five in all, diverted to Kwajalein.

As for *Mezu*, that scout carrier had also taken three hits, with very bad fires, and it was desperately steering for Maloelap to try and find an anchorage before it went down. Yamamoto had sent the two scouts out to look for enemy carriers, and now he knew exactly where they were, but at great cost. Carrier Division 1, with *Akagi* and *Soryu*, were well south, the primary covering force for the convoy bringing the Sakaguchi Detachment for the Fiji invasion. Yamamoto was there aboard the *Yamato*, and the battlecruiser *Kirishima* followed in the wake of that powerful ship. Cruisers *Takao* and *Atago* were up in front with five more destroyers in a wide escort fan.

Admiral Ugaki came in with the bad news. *Gozo* was gone, *Mezu* badly damaged, and the Americans were pounding the Marshalls. "We are not too far south," he said excitedly. "We can still turn and engage."

"And leave the invasion group uncovered?"

"Those carriers would have to come south to threaten that convoy, and to do so they would have to get past us first."

"How many enemy carriers were sighted?"

"Only two, with a number of cruisers and destroyers. Admiral, if we do

not turn, that task force could even pose a grave threat to our main base at Truk. We have only a single squadron of nine A6Ms, and they will not be able to adequately protect that anchorage. *Musashi* is just sitting there collecting staff reports and signals traffic, and consider we still have a number of merchant ships anchored, and valuable facilities that cannot be compromised.”

“Yet the Americans could simply withdraw east now. This report says the last remaining planes off *Mezu* diverted to Kwajalein. We will lose contact, and if we go north, they could swing down and find our invasion group.”

“Truk sir. That base could be severely damaged if we do not intervene.”

“Then you consider it more valuable than the troops we are escorting now?”

“I do, sir. We must not allow this American raiding group to proceed. It must be challenged, here and now. Isn’t that what we hoped to do in the naval component of the FS plan? We have found the American carriers, and now we must go and destroy them.”

It was a very difficult decision, for if the invasion group was found and attacked, it would seriously compromise the entire Fiji invasion plan. Operation FS would not have the forces required to prosecute that battle.

“Where is Carrier Division 5?” asked Yamamoto.

“The last report had them 60 miles west of Mundo in the Solomon Sea.”

“Hara has seen nothing of those remaining enemy carriers?”

“No sir.

“And the Abe Detachment?”

“It has reached the rendezvous point off Lakatoro in the New Hebrides.”

Yamamoto thought for a moment, then decided. “I do not think this American carrier group is going to bother Truk. It is clear, however, that our ruse regarding Midway was not entirely successful. This group may have been on watch there, but it has obviously moved into the Marshalls. I believe it will now come south in our wake, because that is where I intend to take this task force. We will fulfill our primary mission and continue to cover the Sakaguchi Detachment. Remember, we still have no firm report on the location of those carriers that were spotted near Fiji. Until I do have better information, it is my decision to move our two carrier divisions into supporting range of one another. Order Hara’s 5th Carrier Division to proceed to the rendezvous point. We will make that our destination as well.”

Yamamoto saw his Chief of Staff hesitate ever so briefly, then he bowed, knowing an order when he heard one. As one last consideration, Yamamoto spoke again.

“There are 27 A6M fighters at Lae, and I do not think they will be all needed there, as our troops have already made a successful landing at Port Moresby. They report no enemy air defenses there worth mentioning. So we will move another three *Shotai*, nine more A6M fighters from Rabaul to Truk immediately, and you may notify the base to assume a high level of preparedness. Rabaul may then pull a squadron from Lae to replace those fighters.”

Ugaki nodded, and the die was cast. It was a decision that would soon set off a naval duel that would now crackle and pop like a string of fireworks. For far to the south, Admiral Fletcher had another difficult decision to make. The Japanese had beaten him to Port Moresby. Troops were already on the beaches there, and a small ongoing duel was underway between local shore batteries and the 6-inch guns mounted on the transports. Two enemy ships had been hit, set afire, and looked to be total losses, but most of the landing force was already ashore. Now what?

“The Aussies have a small scout group out there waiting for us, sir,” said Captain Archibald Hugh Douglas on the *Saratoga*, where Fletcher had planted his flag.

“I don’t think we can keep that appointment,” said Fletcher disconsolately. He had been thinking the situation over. They had reports from Catalinas that spotted four Jap carriers near the Rossell Island Group in the Lower Solomons. Four Jap carriers! That report had not been confirmed, but it was clear the enemy was moving in that direction with their main body. The report was erroneous, a mix-up where two separate planes had each reported a pair of carriers, Hara’s 5th Carrier Division. Yet once those reports reached Suva, they got stitched together by an eager clerk into four carriers.

Two carriers or four, it was intelligence that Fletcher could not ignore. He already knew where Halsey was, and that he was now turning south towards the lower Solomons with the intention of destroying the new enemy seaplane base at Tulagi.

“I think we have to turn,” said Fletcher. “We’re still two days from being any help to Port Moresby, but if I turn north by northeast now, I can move to effect a conjunction with Halsey, and between the two of us, we’ll have those

four carriers in a vise.”

“Assuming they don’t have us for lunch first,” said Captain Douglas.

“I know,” said Fletcher. “It’s a risk. They’ll have interior lines and could turn one way or another and gang up on either side of our pincer operation here. But I’m gambling we can catch them before they catch us. Ever play chess Captain? The rule of thumb is to get those two Knights into action before the Bishops are developed. Well, we’re those two Knights. Halsey has the Bishops. So I’m heading right into the middle of the board where a good Knight belongs. Get the boys up on deck and come to 030, ahead full.”

Fletcher made his choice, and his move. With it, the history would now turn to a new page. It seemed there was going to be a battle in the Coral Sea after all, and he was sailing right into the thick of it.

Part VI

Combinations

“You have to have the fighting spirit. You have to force moves and take chances. That’s what Chess is all about. One day you give your opponent a lesson, the next day he gives you one.”

— Bobby Fischer

Chapter 16

Battle of the Coral Sea

Fletcher had initially moved west around Noumea with the intention of fulfilling orders to strike at enemy bases throughout the Bismarck Archipelago, principally Gasmata and Rabaul. It was only a matter of circumstance that he then learned of Operation MO aimed at Port Moresby, and hastened to attempt an intervention. Had he been bolder, and risked a passage directly through the New Hebrides, he might have made a difference in that battle, but his swing well south of Noumea, where the Allies knew the Carrier *Hiyo* had laid her eggs by drooping off her entire air wing, was an example of the caution he exercised in battle.

Fletcher was a Black Shoe Admiral, schooled in surface warfare, and not one of the old Brown Shoe Admirals born and bred for carrier warfare. When Grace's ANZAC squadron consisting of the heavy cruiser *Australia*, light cruiser *Hobart* and a destroyer was ordered to make a beeline for Port Moresby in an attempt to get at the invasion underway there, Fletcher thought he would ride in late to the rescue, until that fateful sighting report of four Japanese carriers that had been multiplied twice over.

In one sense, the sighting would end up being correct. The Black Shoe Admiral would end up tangling with all four Japanese fleet carriers before his sortie ended. When he turned northeast, it wasn't long before planes off the *Saratoga* spotted the enemy right where they expected them to be to the northwest. With a predominance of SBD dive bombers in his task force, Fletcher wasted no time ordering a full strike. Yet the man on the other side was no slouch, Admiral Hara, the stalwart bullish figure the fleet came to call "King Kong."

* * *

A big man, broad shouldered, and with a thick neck that simply became his head, Chuichi Hara looked every bit the part. He was out with 5th Carrier

Division, which had been carrying the burden of most all fleet air support operations since Pearl Harbor. The damage to *Kaga*, the loss of *Hiryu* in that strange missile attack, and the refit scheduled for *Akagi* had left his division the only force ready to support southern offensive operations. When he first heard the news about *Hiryu* going down he was profoundly shocked—*Hiryu struck by heavy rocket weapon just before planned launch... fires uncontrollable...*

He found his eyes lingering on that message... heavy rocket weapon... What in the world could that have been? Yet even as he thought that, he knew something in some hidden recess of his mind that was shouting out a warning. Rocket weapon...

That night he saw them in his sleep, bright fiery tails trailing thin white smoke that caught the last fading remnants of the sun near dusk, and soon became gold, then crimson, as if some great unseen beast had clawed the sky. He remembered awakening in a cold sweat, his eyes wide, then realized it was only a dream, shaking it off and listening to the ship as it rode smoothly through the flat dark sea. Why did that report disturb him so? Was it merely the loss of that ship? No, it was something more, but he could not remember it.

He had successfully covered Operation R as Rabaul was taken without a hitch from the Australians. Gasmata and the rest of New Britain were occupied soon after, and then Lae and Salamaua fell easily. He had then been ordered to the Java Sea to support the landings there, but that terrible eruption had shaken that entire theater and driven even the gods of war to heel. Half the Java Sea was now blighted with ashfall, and passage west into the Indian Ocean was now a hazardous affair. The planned raid there had already been cancelled when the Rabaul operation was accelerated, so Hara had no regrets. He was pleased to be ordered east again into calmer waters, and glad to be supporting the move south into the Solomon Sea.

The Japanese carriers had also spotted the approach of the American task force to the southwest, and they were feverishly preparing to strike this unexpected enemy. Hara would order his dive bombers to lead the attack, three squadrons under Sakamoto, Ema and Hayashi. As they took longer to fuel and arm, he would hold his torpedo bombers for the second wave.

Dawn was just lightening the sky when the first planes roared off the long flight deck of *Zuikaku*, the *Lucky Crane* where Hara had decided to plan his

flag. He had considered *Shokaku*, the lead ship in the class, but something about her Captain, Takaji Jojima, irritated him, and he was already too prone to grumble with a bad temper.

It was just our good luck that we saw those carriers, thought Hara. Now we must kill them, as they are undoubtedly here to try and interfere with the MO invasion force. But that will not happen—not on my watch—not with Sakamoto up there now. He always went out onto the weather deck to watch the planes form up, the drone and growl of their engines seeming like a swarm of angry bees to him. The formations circled in place until the last *Shotai* came up to join them. Then he saw the lead plane in the centermost group dip its wings. Sakamoto was saluting him as the dive bombers started on their way.

He looked at his watch... they would be at least an hour out to the suspected location of the enemy carriers, more than enough time to make his offering to the Thunder Gods looming like shadows in the line of clouds off to the north. His carriers had turned into the wind to launch, but now he would give the order to come about, closing the range on the enemy as the strike proceeded. He bowed to the distant storm as *Zuikaku* began her long graceful turn. Soon he saw *Shokaku* come abreast to keep formation, the *Soaring Crane* looking trim and fast that morning. He breathed deeply, smelling the rain behind him on that wind. It was a good day for battle.

* * *

“Archie, how do you like that?” said Fletcher with a broad smile. “Halsey caught a pair of Jap carriers up north and blew them to hell!” He handed the message to Captain Douglas, who looked it over with a nod.

“Tough old bird,” he said. “How’d he get *Enterprise* and *Hornet* turned around so quickly. He’s in the Marshalls?”

“Must have chewed on Nimitz a good long while to get him to see through this Midway crap. I never bought it for one second.”

“HYPO sure thought they nailed it,” said Douglas. “I thought they were going to pull us north last week.”

“Not with this MO operation. That was the fly in the ointment. Why would the Japs have a big operation planned for Midway when they were still pushing so hard down here to get into the Solomons? No. As soon as I heard

they had something planned for Port Moresby, I realized this Midway thing was nonsense. Nimitz must have realized it too, otherwise he'd still have Halsey on a leash up there."

"I thought he was waiting for the *Wasp*?"

"I did too, but now I think they'll send that ship south as well. Something is brewing out here, and I think we've just got wind of it with this sighting. Four Jap carriers? Hell, you know damn well they aren't heading for Midway if they're this far south."

"Right," said Douglas, "but they're still pretty far east to have anything to do with this Moresby operation."

"That's why I think there's something more to all this," said Fletcher. "It wouldn't surprise me to find out they have troop ships out there bound for Fiji. They were snooping around there with submarines last week."

"Fiji? Then you think they're after Suva?"

"It would be a real plum if they ever did manage that." Fletcher scratched his head, replacing his cap and looking out the narrow window at the flight deck as his dive bombers began to launch. "Our job is to see that never happens."

"What about Moresby and the raid on Rabaul."

"Can't be helped. We're a day late and more than a dollar short. Now we've got four Jap flattops out here, and that trumps everything else. Halsey's been ordered to get down here ASAP."

"He won't be any help for a good long while." Douglas had just the hint of nerves in his tone. *Saratoga* was going into her first real fight here, untested and untried. "Let's hope we get lucky today."

* * *

When Sakamoto saw the enemy carriers below, he smiled. It looked like a very weak escort group, only a few cruisers and destroyers, and there were two easy targets just waiting for his bombs. Ema's group was on his left, Hayashi on the right, and though he had every right to begin this attack himself, Ema was in the best position, and he signaled that he should have the honor of leading in the strike. He knew Hara well enough to also know the torpedo planes would soon follow, vectored in from the information he had sent back on the enemy position.

Now it was time for the Thunder Gods. He had every dive bomber available from *Zuikaku*, and two *Shotai* from *Shokaku* had mistakenly followed his formation as well. That would now send 33 D3As into this attack, and there was no better plane in the world for naval air strike at this time, and certainly no better pilots. That was the lethal combination that was going to ruin Admiral Fletcher's day, and inflict a staggering blow to US hopes in the early months of the war.

Ema's planes were already attacking through a thin AA defense, but more allied guns were getting into the action. He could see enemy fighters trundling down the long flight decks of the carriers to scramble on defense, but no more than 16 would ever get into action before his attack was driven home. With 22 A6M2 fighters escorting his planes, he was confident that most of his men would get through.

Now it was his turn, his wings tipping over as he maneuvered to attack position. One by one the three *Shotai* he commanded would follow him down, and after that Hayashi would move in support. Even as he began his dive, he was thrilled to see the first bombs from Ema's group finding targets. The lead enemy carrier was straddled, and one came down right on the forward flight deck in a dark blooming explosion.

The flack thickened around his planes as they fell on the enemy, but Sakamoto was heedless, his mind on only one thing. His fate was now in the hands of the Thunder Gods he served. The line of his descent was now fixed, and his soul would follow it, carrying with it the echoing voices of all his ancestors. The ship in his sights looked like it was *Lexington* Class, the prominent joined stack section mounted behind a much small conning island forward. The other ship was different... yes... *Yorktown* Class, with both the conning section and stack joined on one island. He knew now that he was diving on the *Saratoga*, and he would not fail to deliver his charge, a 500 pound armor penetrating bomb that went right through that long flight deck to wreak havoc when it exploded on the hanger deck below.

* * *

Fletcher saw the planes coming , and they did not have enough F4s up on cap. Three had found and met the enemy escorts, four more joining them quickly from the patrols aloft. He had six more up with two ready sections off

each carrier, and he could see *Yorktown* scrambling three more. Down on the flight deck, the blue wings were ready to go with another fighter section from *Saratoga*, but it would never take off. Sakamoto had just seen to that when his bomb fell right forward of the main conning section on the flight deck. There was a shudder as the explosion rocked the ship, and fragments of the shattered deck clanked against his conning section, followed by thick black smoke.

“They couldn’t have put that one in a worse place,” said Captain Douglas, his face grim and set.

“Thank god we launched the dive bombers half an hour ago,” said Fletcher. “We’re going to take some lumps here, but we put 60 SBDs in the air with a good escort, and they better find those bastards.”

“They’ll find them,” said Douglas, “and they’ll hurt them too. Let’s hope to god we’ve got an operational flight deck here when they get home.”

They could already see the damage control teams rushing to get a hose stream right into that hole in the flight deck. It looked bad, and it was going to get a lot worse. Sakamoto’s bomb would not be the last to hit home. The pilots of the Misty Lagoon were in rare form that day, and it was Hayashi’s group that proved to be particularly lethal.

* * *

He dove into the blooming dawn, seeing the line of distant clouds framing the horizon. Hayashi was in the lead, riding his machine with the special brew of adrenaline that only active combat can produce. It was fear restrained by excitement and the sheer will to survive and bring harm to the enemy. It was dedication and bravery, and both came with a heavy dose of mayhem and insanity. There were thirty seconds down, five to pull out, and just before, that single split second on the edge of fate where the bomb releases, swinging down on the trapeze, and whistling into the leaden sky. He had to time that moment perfectly, the effort of synapse, muscle and bone.

All the while he focused his mind on only one thing—the target—ignoring all else. Somewhere, the ten other things he had to do in a dive were all being processed by his brain. His hands and feet moved, applying just the right pressure, at just the right time. Then it was bomb away. Hayashi was going to get his hit. He could hear the explosion, and see the bright tongues

of fire leaping up in his wake after he pulled out. His would be one of three other bombs delivered to that carrier that morning, and when they were done, the *Saratoga* was a flaming wreck.

* * *

The fires were burning deep, well below the main flight deck, but it wasn't until Hayashi had made the climb up to 10,000 feet again that the final blow would be delivered by the N5N torpedo bombers. Matsua had arrived with the 18 planes of the Lucky Crane, and they were going in. Four bomb hits on *Sara* would now get insult added to injury when two torpedoes put the ship into a steep list. Fletcher suddenly had much more to worry about than clearing his flight deck. It was now a question of whether he could even save the ship.

The island was largely intact, but the hanger deck was severely compromised with three separate fires, and he had two gaping holes on his starboard side, and a list that forced him to counter-flood and lose his main magazine in the process. No matter what he did now, *Saratoga* was out of this fight. Her planes were still out there somewhere, but her war would soon be over. Captain Douglas came running up the stairs to the smoky bridge, his eyes carrying the bad news before he could speak a single word.

"It doesn't look good," he said. "We're still shipping water, and they can't stop that breach forward. We'll be down at the bow well over 5 degrees in ten minutes. Admiral, I think we're going to lose her. You had best consider transferring your flag to one of the cruisers."

"My God," said Fletcher as another explosion thundered up. "Look at the *Yorktown*."

They stared, seeing the tall column of fire and smoke amidships. Seven bombs had done the work there, and one of them set off the aviation bomb storage magazine. It blew a thirty-five foot segment of the hull clean off the ship, and now the smoke was so heavy they could barely see the bow of the carrier. "We're going to lose them both..." Fletcher had a dull, vacant look in his eye. "I knew we were looking for too much trouble coming north like this. Why the hell wasn't I more careful?" It was too late for caution now.

The ship rumbled with a heavy vibration.

"Sir," said the Captain. "With your permission, I think we should get the

crew off as soon as we can. They're after the cruisers now. *Minneapolis* took at least two hits, along with *Pensacola*. *Chester* is damn near dead in the water, but *New Orleans* still has some fight in her. Get on over there, sir. We'll need you off this ship."

Fletcher could hardly believe what had just happened to his task force. One minute he was leaning on a hand rail, eyeing the weather report with one ear cocked towards the overhead radio speaker. The pilots were finally getting into the fight at the other end of this affair, out there somewhere to the northwest, but they couldn't return to this little slice of hell on the sea. If any man among them would live out this day, they would have to get to the Santa Cruz Islands. There was a small landing strip there, and Ndeni was still controlled by the Aussies.

He looked at Captain Douglass, eyes glassy as he spoke. "Get a signal off to CINCPAC if we still can. Tell them what happened and that I'm taking anything that can still float to Brisbane."

In thirty minutes time, Sakamoto, Ema, Hayashi and Matsua had virtually destroyed Taffy Eleven, and neither *Saratoga* nor *Yorktown* would make it anywhere near Brisbane.

Chapter 17

The radar eyes on the *Takami* had not failed to notice the drama unfolding in the Coral Sea. Fukada seemed very restless on his bridge watch, lingering after Captain Harada had come up to relieve him. He was hovering over the Phased Array readout panels, asking Lieutenant Ryoko Otani one question after another.

“How far off is that mess?” He was seeming multiple contacts, and getting a bit nervous. They were over the last reported position of the Japanese 5th Carrier division.

“That’s right on the edge of our scanning range,” said Otani. “About 170 Nautical miles as I read it.” The SPY-1D could range out 175 nautical miles for airborne contacts at that altitude, and about 45 for low approach vector targets like missiles. Had the planes been higher, the radar could have seen much farther. But they were getting an assist from one of the helicopters, and seeing an event that was actually 290 miles away.

“Too far for our SM-2s,” said Fukada. “But our SM-3s could get out there.”

“What’s all this about?” Captain Harada came over, arms folded, eyes on Otani’s screens.

“A nice little swarm over the 5th Carrier Division,” she explained.

“A launch or recovery operation?”

“Could be a bit of both, but the fact that it came on my screen from the south leads me to suspect the latter.”

“It might also be an enemy strike underway,” said Fukada. “We can’t rule that out.”

“How many bees?” asked Harada.

“I’m reading 97 distinct contacts, but we had 6 marked as likely CAP patrols earlier.”

“If that is a strike then those carriers would have doubled down on that with a scramble. Did we send a warning.”

“No sir, the reading just came in and the XO and I were just trying to sort it all out.”

Harada looked at Fukada. “So what was that about our SM-3s?”

“I was just commenting that it was the only missile we had that could make the range.”

“Right,” said the Captain. “All twelve of them.” The *Takami* had a total of 96 VLS cells, and a mix of three different missiles sharing them. The medium range SM-2s got the lion’s share, with 74 missiles that could range out 65 to 100 nautical miles. They had only a dozen of the longer range SM-3, designed to foil ballistic missile attacks at ranges out to 375 nautical miles for the Block IA/B versions, of which there were ten. The last two were block IIA, a very long range missile interceptor that could get out 1350 nautical miles, and with a ceiling of just under 1000 miles.

“Take the S3s off your list for any combat operation we’re likely to see here,” said Harada. “They’re just too damn valuable. I’ll make them the last dozen missiles we ever fire.” The remaining ten silos housed the RUM 139 ASROC anti sub missile, so in effect, their air defense at range was going to result in no more than 74 kills, and they had already fired three. There were no reloads. Underway replenishment for the Mark 41 VLS system was just not in the cards, and even if they could reload at sea, there would never be a replenishment ship out there to service them.

Harada could see that Fukada was edgy, and spoke again. “I know you’re itching to get into this fight XO, but we have to hold our cards close to our chest here, and play things out sparingly—that is if we want to retain any clout with Yamamoto, let alone for our own defense.”

“I understand that,” said Fukada. “I wasn’t suggesting we fire the SM-3s Captain—just thinking out loud.”

“Fair enough.” Harada looked over at his Comm station, where Hiroko Shiota was back at her post. “Let me know the minute you hear anything,” he said.

Half an hour later, that minute came. “Captain,” said Shiota. “I’m getting something now.” She was running it all through the decryption computer. They had warned Yamamoto that the Americans were snooping on his naval code, but said nothing of the fact that they had the whole thing programmed into their lightning fast decryption module. “Damn if it doesn’t sound like a distress call sir. It reads ‘*Soaring Crane* has fallen—REPEAT—*Soaring Crane* has fallen.’ What do you make of it sir?”

Fukada spoke before anyone else. “*Shokaku*,” he said sullenly. “That’s the

Soaring Crane. It looks like we found out what our swarm of bees was. That must have been an American strike after all.”

“Right sir,” said Lieutenant Otani on the SPY-1D. “It’s breaking up now, but this is odd, the contacts aren’t resuming a heading south to their home carriers. At least they aren’t going home the way they came in. They’re headed our way.”

Fukada rushed over. “Show me.”

She pointed out the tracks, overlaid a predictive plot, and it showed about forty contacts heading east. “Where could they be going, sir?”

“The Santa Cruz Islands are right on that same heading,” said Fukada, his eyes shifting from one place to another on the screen. “Mister Ikida,” he raised his voice to get the navigator’s attention.

“Sir?” Michi Ikida turned to acknowledge.

“You have the position on this ruckus Otani’s been watching?”

“Sir, yes sir. I read it at—”

“How far to the Santa Cruz Islands?”

“Well sir, from the present reading, about 270 standard miles.”

Fukada smiled. “There’s our answer.” He turned to Captain Harada. “Someone must have passed the word that the nest was on fire. Those planes must be trying to divert to Ndeni. There’s a small airstrip there, and that’s still Australian held territory.”

Harada walked over to have a look at Ikida’s plot map. It made sense. “Which means...”

“The Americans got smashed,” said Fukada with a smile. “Hara must have had a strike wave up at the same time and hurt the American carriers, possibly even sunk them. If they were still operational, why would those planes divert to the Santa Cruz Islands? Unless... Could they possibly know of our presence here?”

“I doubt that,” said Harada. “We were snooped by that presumed PBY out of Fiji, but it would be some pretty fancy flying to send one group like this and attempt a double strike.”

“Not that it matters,” said Fukada. “They’ll soon be well inside our SM-2 range when they approach. We can knock them down before they make landfall.”

There was complete silence on the bridge after Fukada said that, and a couple of the junior officers shifted uncomfortably. Then Harada spoke. “I’m

not sure I like that idea, Mister Fukada. It just feels a little too much like hitting the other fellow when he's down."

"But sir, what if they do know we're here. What if some of those planes are still carrying ordnance?"

"We'll know that in time if they approach, but my bet is that they are diverting to those islands."

"Well, if those planes land safely there, we'll just have to deal with them again one day."

"Will we? The way I read it is like this: there's probably forty or fifty planes left out there, half as many as they came with for this mission. It was their first, am I correct in that?"

"I'm reading about 60 contacts sir," said Otani.

"And they just got some very bad news from home. Now they're all probably looking at their fuel gauges and wondering how far those damn islands are, and whether they'll make it or be forced to ditch and take their chances with the sharks. No, I don't think I'll add our SM-2s to the list of things they're worrying about right now. They've done their job, and I'd guess most are no longer carrying any ordnance. They'll jettison it to conserve fuel, and even then, they'll be damn near empty if they do land at Ndeni, and I don't think there will be any air crews waiting to arm and gas up those planes. No, I think their war is over for a while. Who knows how long it would be before the US got anyone out there to see about them. So they aren't our business here. Like I said, our missiles are just too damn precious. Any combat order I issue will be for a clear and present danger to this ship, or to the task force we are supporting. That's a standing order." He looked at Fukada and the others. "So remember it—and while you're at it, remember the men who died out there today, on both sides. Mister Fukada thinks we lost the *Shokaku* today. Maybe he's right, and maybe the other side took a few hard knocks as well. Let's work this into a signal to Yamamoto and let him know what our take is on this intelligence. If he's concerned about it, he can strengthen his defensive CAP. Other than that, its steady as she goes."

* * *

Halsey took the message, eyeing it with those aquiline eyes, his brow furrowed beneath his cap. Then his sour expression deepened, and he reached

up and threw that cap right on the deck.

“Now what in God’s name is this all about?” He had a mind to say something considerably worse, but given his cap was already on the deck, and the eyes of every officer on the bridge were on him now, he restrained himself. Captain George Murray was standing by his chair, arms folded. “In my ready room,” said Halsey, and he went steaming off, leaving his cap behind. Murry had the presence of mind to stoop and pick it up as he followed. The two men entered the small room off the main bridge, and closed the hatch.

The island of a carrier was much smaller than many would think, with small metal walled rooms, low ceilings, hatches you had to step up and over to get through. The ceiling was a morass of bundled cables, squawk boxes, PA speakers and other oddments. Murray had glanced at the broad Plexiglas status board to make certain nothing was amiss there, but he suspected the source of the Admiral’s anger was not ship’s rotations or anything else that was aboard before that message just came in. He knew what it was—orders—and they were obviously not to Halsey’s liking.

“Will you look at this?” Halsey handed off the message, scowling, watching as Murray looked it over, scratching his head.

“Ellice Islands? Why there?”

“God only knows.” Halsey snatched the message back and read it aloud. “EAM - Withdraw immediately to rendezvous at coordinates to follow. Additional Message to follow. An Emergency Action Message. Funatuti? That’s in the Ellice Islands Group! Well here I was just about to lock horns with Yamamoto and now they want to pull us off east? That next message had better have a damn good reason for this bullshit. What’s Nimitz doing?”

“Steady Admiral. He must know something we don’t know. We haven’t heard a thing from Fletcher for the last six hours, and we know he got into something down south.”

“All the more reason to get down there,” said Halsey, eyes wide, the anger still there.

“Commander, Pacific Fleet wants us somewhere else,” said Murray. EAM is an order, hard and fast in any book I ever read. Let’s wait this out and see what this next message is all about.” He handed Halsey his cap, a wry smile on his face easing the atmosphere in the cramped quarters.

It wasn’t long before they got that second message, but it didn’t come

before CINCPAC sent a request that Halsey confirm his new heading. When it did come, the news was far worse than anything Halsey expected. “Mother of God,” he said this time. “We lost *Yorktown* and *Saratoga*—both of them went down in the Coral Sea.... We’re to move east at once and rendezvous with *Wasp* and *Shiloh*. Sweet Jesus, they don’t even know if Fletcher made it to one of the cruisers safely.”

“Did we get off an attack?”

“Apparently. They found the Jap carriers and scored hits on both, but fuel was suddenly a big issue. They all had to divert to the Santa Cruz Islands.”

“Well we can get down there and bring them home,” said Murray.

“Captain, twenty minutes ago you were telling me about orders. No. Anybody that made it to those islands and landed safely will just have to sit there until we sort things out. Right now Nimitz wants us to meet up with *Wasp* and *Shiloh*. They left Pearl five days ago and have been heading our way. They’ll have a tanker waiting for us there as well.”

“Nimitz wants to draw another two cards before he makes his next bet,” said Murray.

“Sounds that way. Christ, this is almost as bad as Pearl. To top it off, the Japs got through to Moresby and took the place yesterday. Radio Tokyo made the announcement at 16:00, and rubbed it in real good. The bastards even invited us to try and take another crack at Tokyo and see what happens.”

Murray shook his head. “This is getting serious. We’re down to three fleet carriers now, and the two scout carriers. *Antietam* is still laid up in Pearl, and after *Wasp*, we won’t get anything else for a good long while. We just can’t afford to lose anything else out here. What do you figure Nimitz is scheming on?”

“Fiji,” said Halsey. “HYPO dropped this bullshit about A.F. and Midway, and now they think that’s where the Japs are headed next. They told Halsey an invasion group is already at sea. People have been saying something was up, and I never thought it was Midway from the beginning. It’s right down here—Fiji—that’s what they really want now. They take that, and they’ve damn near cut us off from the boys down under.”

“It’s a big ocean out there,” said Murray. “They can think that, but we’ll just fall back on Samoa. Pago Pago is every bit as good as Suva for a staging point. They’re even shipping in the 1st Marine Division there.”

“Well don’t throw this match just yet,” said Halsey. “If they are planning

to hit Fiji, I should be down there as soon as possible. Waiting for *Wasp* and *Shiloh* could let them get ashore before we have anything to say about it.”

“Face it, Bill. We just lost Fletcher’s entire group, and Nimitz isn’t taking any chances now. He wants us loaded for bear before he moves anywhere close to the Japs again. They only had four carriers at Truk, and maybe Fletcher got one in that scrap. With *Wasp*, we can go toe to toe with them on a level playing field. That has to be the plan now.”

Halsey thought for a moment. “If they hit Fletcher that hard it had to cost them something. They would have lost planes, pilots, fuel, munitions, and hell, maybe a carrier too. I’d be willing to bet that was Carrier Division 5 in the Coral Sea, and for my money I’d say they would have to go to the corner before they come out for another round. That’s where we make our move.”

“Then you figure they’ll cover this Fiji operation with those other two carriers from Truk?”

“It’s looking that way. So we may even have the home field advantage when we handshake with *Wasp*. Nimitz knew I’d want to get down there and throw punches the moment I heard about this. That’s why the bastard split these orders into two parts. He wanted to make sure he got me out of the ring and heading east before he sent us that news about Fletcher.”

“The old man’s a sly one,” said Murray with a smile. “But it’s better this way, Bill. You want to take this fight south? With *Wasp* along, we’ll have the muscle. This isn’t over, and we’ve got to play this right. If we lose this one...”

He didn’t have to say anything more.

Chapter 18

When the strike wing finally returned to Hara's task force they were dismayed to find only one carrier there. Sakamoto's knowing eye spotted the *Lucky Crane*, a thin stream of white smoke still trailing from the starboard bow area. He made one fly by pass, seeing the decks were clear and undamaged, and then ordered his men to begin landing.

Hayashi was one of the first down, elated that he had put his bomb right on the enemy carrier, and further pleased by the news that both carriers had been sunk. "But where is *Shokaku*?" he asked.

"Hit many times," said the flight crewman. "The ship went down an hour ago, but we were able to get most of her pilots and crew off safely. There are many aboard, so don't be surprised if we have visitors tonight."

Hayashi went below to find them, speaking with several torpedo plane pilots with consoling words. They had not had the chance to get airborne before the American dive bombers came in. "They made a clumsy attack," one man said, a Lieutenant Sato that Hayashi did not recognize. "But there were many planes. We should have had more fighters up. The gunners on *Shokaku* did their best, but those 25mm guns do not do well against fast moving targets like dive bombers. They are difficult to elevate, track too slowly, and jam all too often."

"I am sorry for your loss, Sato. How is it I do not know you? I recognize most everyone else here from the Division."

"Because this is the second carrier the enemy has taken from me," said Sato sullenly. "I should throw myself overboard, for all I will do here is bring you bad luck."

"Second carrier? Then you were on the *Hiryu*?"

"A good ship," said Sato, with just a hint of nostalgia in his tone.

Hayashi was suddenly very interested. "Tell me," he said. "Is it true that *Hiryu* was sunk by a rocket weapon?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," said Sato, "though I still cannot believe what I witnessed. It was terribly fast, so fast that our gunners had no chance to even take aim at the thing before it struck us. It came from above, then swooped low over the sea. I thought they would get it, but it was not possible."

Nothing could have stopped it, and it found the ship as if it had eyes. To this day, I am convinced it must have been piloted, but where the enemy got such a weapon still escapes me. The Siberians? They've been under our heel for decades, and now they openly declare war on Japan? That is also unbelievable. Talk is that the Russians gave them this weapon. We do not know how it is deployed, but some say there is a ship operating up north that uses these weapons. You have been here in the South Seas, so you may not have heard, but our sailors have given this ship a name up north. They call it —”

“*Mizuchi*,” said Hayashi, yet even as he said that he could not remember ever hearing it.

“Yes!” said Sato. “Then you have heard the story once already? The name is well given. I have not seen this ship, but it must be a demon. It struck the *Hiryu* from well over the horizon with this rocket weapon, and then, when we sent *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* up to get after the Siberians, they came back as floating wrecks. I heard what happened—more of these naval rockets. They strike with terrible speed, and set off raging fires that are simply uncontrollable. Whatever this ship is, it is very powerful, very dangerous. But no one has seen it since. I am no coward, but believe me, when I got the news that I was to be transferred to the South Seas Fleet, I was very happy. The farther away from that demon, the better.”

Mizuchi... Hayashi could see a shadow in his mind, something dark and wavering on the sea. It was as if he was up above, ready to strike with his comrades and then he saw himself falling like a stone to attack. The sky was suddenly alive with the strange smoky tentacles of the beast below them. They reached up to find his brothers, striking the planes and smashing them to pieces as they dove—and yes—they were rockets. Now he felt a cold chill settle over him, and an oppressive sense of dread. *Mizuchi*... death on the sea... his death, but it was a brave death, an honorable death...

He shook his head, almost shivering as he sought to dispel this strange recollection. His better self chided him that he was just being foolish, servicing the fears and rumors that had been circulating through the fleet. But then again, he found it odd that *Kaga* and *Tosa* were not assigned to this operation. Then he heard they had been kept in home waters because of the threat posed by the Siberians, something that would have been laughable just months ago. The Siberians? They had no navy at all, but now it seemed that

was not the case. They did have at least one good ship, something dark and unseen in the cold waters of the north. Something he had the strangest feeling that he, himself, had encountered in the disturbing vision he had just shaken from his mind... *Mizuchi*....

Hayashi looked around the briefing room, seeing the faces of all his squadron mates, their cheeks red, smiling, eyes wide as they boasted of the brave attack they had made against the American carriers. They fought well. They were the best of the best, the pilots of the Misty Lagoon, unmatched by any other flyers in the world. He watched them as they boasted, clapping one another on the back, their hands describing the movement of their planes as they recounted details of the attack. And he watched them go, one by one to seek out food and rest. The *Lucky Crane* was heading north, or so they had learned. They were going back to Rabaul to replenish, and then they would fight again. His men were very eager, and he was proud of them.

He lingered there in the briefing room for some time, hearing the last echoes of the others in the corridor outside. Then a darkness seemed to fall on him, and he saw the empty room, the empty chairs, and that feeling of impending dread returned. What was he thinking? Soon those chairs would all be full again as the men gathered to be briefed on their next strike mission. He would sit next to his good friend Matsua, from the torpedo squadron, and they would discuss tactics after the briefing, just as they always did.

But one day, he thought darkly, those chairs will be empty. Why should it be me that stands here alone to know this? What is this doom I sense all around me now? I must have a case of the jitters from that last mission, though I cannot see why I should be so bothered. No... It was not that, not the mission. I have flown so many others, and never felt any fear worth mentioning. I am no coward. I am not afraid to give my life to strike my enemy, for that is what I came here for. Yet this feeling... it is something more than fear. It is almost as if I can see things that have not yet happened, things that will happen... It is almost as if I can read the book of fate...

He looked around at the empty briefing room, then lowered his head and hastened off to follow his brothers to the mess hall.

* * *

Admiral Hara reviewed his orders, a subtle knowing smile the only faint

outward sign that he had finally come to terms with what had happened.

Secret South Seas Fleet Operational Order No. 13

Moresby Carrier Force: CV Division 5 – Admiral Chuichi Hara

Sortie from Truk towards the Solomon Islands on about day X–10 through waters to the north-east, and then continue to provide direct support for the Tulagi invasion operation. On day X–5, (the day after the start of reconnaissance flying boat patrols from Tulagi), enter the Coral Sea from the east of the Solomon Islands, begin to provide direct support to the Moresby Invasion Force as required, according to the following strategies.

a. *When a powerful naval force is detected, first attack and destroy.*

We have certainly done that, he thought. Two enemy carriers! Yet for that we pay with the loss of our sister ship. The *Soaring Crane* will never fly again. *Shokaku* is gone...

b. *Continue to make preparations for the appearance of a powerful naval force, and mobilize to protect the Fiji Invasion Force as required. Provide limited air patrolling and support for the Fiji Invasion Force when this becomes necessary according to the situation.*

Not possible. The action against the Americans in the Coral Sea has left me with only minor damage here on *Zuikaku*. The *Lucky Crane* lives up to its name, but we have lost planes, pilots, and now we need to replenish before I can hope to be of any further use to Operation FS. My torpedo bombers have only six lances remaining. It will be necessary to withdraw to Rabaul.

c. *Up until day X+5 after the successful landing at Fiji, continue preparations for the appearance of a powerful enemy naval force in the area of the Koro Sea within range of Japanese landing sites. Command of naval units in the area shall be directly under Combined Fleet Headquarters aboard Yamato when engaging a powerful enemy force.*

That explains Yamamoto's order for me to disengage and move east to the New Hebrides instead of pursuing the survivors from that enemy task force we engaged. He wanted me to join Carrier Division 1 and restore the *Kido Butai* to its normal full strength of four fleet carriers. Unfortunately, I

cannot do so, and I have so informed Combined Fleet Headquarters of that sad fact. The Fiji Operation will now only be supported by Carrier Division 1, but I have at least succeeded in covering Operation MO, and insuring the invasion and occupation of Tulagi and Port Moresby. The latter was a significant victory. If nothing else, this will reinforce my proposal that we should make Darwin our next Objective after Fiji is secured.

Yamamoto will continue south, even though we know there are enemy carriers lurking well north of the operational area in the Marshalls. There we paid again, losing both *Gozo* and *Mezu* to what was apparently a much stronger enemy task force. That was inevitable. Those two scout carriers could muster no more than 24 planes between them, and at least most of those safely diverted to Kwajalein. Where are those American carriers now? I was ordered to retrace my route near Tulagi on my way back to Rabaul, though I cannot see why. This single carrier could not oppose another strong enemy carrier task force. So Yamamoto will have to deal with that, and I hope he is equal to the task. *Akagi* has returned to the fleet, and the crews on *Soryu* have also lost their sister ship to that strange rocket attack up north.

That had been quite the mystery. I have heard fleet rumors, whispers in the intelligence channels, talk about Karafuto—Sakhalin Island. That is why we are not at full strength here. *Tosa* had to be retained in home waters, and *Kaga* is still under repair. That, and the unfortunate terror that nearly destroyed the entire 2nd Infantry Division on Java, have forced us to conduct these operations with only four fleet carriers.

The Army was none too happy about the loss of that division, and they have refused to replace it. It was all Yamamoto and Ugaki could do to get them to agree to take the 48th Division from Java and reduce the garrison there to only one division. Now where will I get the force I need for my Darwin proposal? Perhaps I could see if General Imamura could spare anything from Singapore, but that will have to wait... For now, I must get *Zuikaku* safely back to Rabaul, repair that small hole in our bow where that last American dive bomber got lucky, and then we will see what the situation is regarding Fiji.

Something tells me I may never lead that Darwin invasion. This may be the last operation we conduct in the south. Come May, we will be looking over our shoulder in the north. We feared a war on two fronts. Yes, I warned Ugaki about it before Pearl Harbor, but he said it was simply too late to

change any of the plans. Now look at the situation. We are fighting the British in Burma out west, the Americans here in the south and now the Siberians in the north—a three front war! Ugaki should have listened to me....

* * *

That same day the invasion forces made their approach to Fiji, and the pilots of Carrier Division 1 finally got their chance to get into action. Sweeps were conducted by the A6M2 squadrons, finding a surprising number of enemy fighters up to oppose them. But the enemy planes were all older P-39s and P-400s, a variant of that same plane. They had been delivered there months ago by the *Pensacola* Convoy, uncrated and assembled into the 67th Pursuit Squadron. The inexperienced pilots would now get their chance against the Aces of Carrier Division 1, and though a few got lucky with an occasional shot that damaged or downed an enemy plane, they paid a high price.

There had been 42 operational planes available on the airfield near Suva at the southeastern corner of Fiji. By the end of the first day, that number had been reduced to twenty. Then the dive bombers came off the carriers, pounding the field and blasting another six planes on the ground, older Buffalos that had no business in the skies above, even though they had tried to scramble when the air alert sounded. Four were caught on the tarmac, another two gunned to firing wrecks as a pair of Zeroes swooped low to strafe the field as the Buffaloes were trying to take off.

Job one for the carrier strike group led by Yamamoto was to neutralize that airfield and any chance that the Americans could use those planes to attack the troop transports. Through all this action, DDG-180 simply provided services as an early warning picket. The Phased Array radar could spot any enemy planes unfailingly, and the information was quickly radioed to *Akagi*. No missiles were needed, as the Japanese pilots were more than capable in this situation, and the P-39s posed no real strike threat.

There had also been a variant of the SDB-Dauntless Dive Bomber crated up in the *Pensacola* Convoy, dubbed the A-24 Banshee by the Army Air Force. Yet those planes had been sent to Pago Pago, and were not available at Suva when the attack finally started.

The invasion groups had been well coordinated, and the order Nimitz had sent to Halsey meant that Carrier Division 1 would impose its Steel Reign over the scene on the first three days of the battle. The main objective of the landings was not Suva Bay, but Nandi on the western coast of the main island of Viti Lavu.

Fiji Was a large island, some 95 miles at its widest point and 65 miles top to bottom. It was surrounded by long archipelagoes of smaller islands, with one large sister in Vanua Levu to the northeast. That island was over 110 miles long, but no more than 20 to 30 miles wide, and much less developed. Most of the primary installations were on the big island of Viti Lavu that most associated with the name "Fiji." The main port and airfield was at Suva, but there was also a port at Nandi and Lautoka, on the northern edge of Nandi Bay.

This would be the main objective of the Japanese landing, for they had determined that there were only two Brigades of troops from New Zealand, the 8th at Suva and the 14th at Nandi. It was thought that they could then overwhelm the defense at Nandi to secure a lodgment on the main island, and Nandi Bay offered a good anchorage site for the transports to offload their supplies.

But things had changed in the early months of the war. The arrival of the 132nd Infantry Regiment of the US 23rd Division at Suva had seen the 8th Brigade moved to reinforce Nandi, and so when the Abe Detachment began to storm ashore under the thunder of Yamato's great guns, they would meet twice the force they expected to find there. The many combination that ensued in the naval maneuvers had set the scene, but now it was time for the grinding endgame as the invasion itself got underway. As always, no plan ever survived first contact with the enemy, and this one was no different.

Part VII

Endgame

*“Play the opening like a book, the middle game like
a magician, and the endgame like a machine.”*

— Spielmann

Chapter 19

15 April, 1942

On the western perimeter of the reefs and atolls surrounding the main islands of the Fiji Group were the Yasawa Group, a string of long thin islands that seemed to rise like bubbles from the snout of the great flat fish body of Viti Lavu below. They were mostly hilly wooded land, but the main island in the north presented some reasonably open land where an airfield might be built. It was there that elements of Base Force 9 would be put ashore to survey the island, clear it of any enemy coastwatchers, and select the best site for an airfield. In this effort, it was supported by the 2nd Yokosuka SNLF battalion, and so a Tulagi sized operation was well underway there before dawn.

Further south, the leading elements of the main invasion group were carrying the 47th Regiment, otherwise known as the Abe Detachment, which was intending to land north of Nandi Bay at Laotoka. That was defended by 29th Battalion, 14th New Zealand Brigade supported by the brigade artillery group. The preliminary bombardment here was fairly intense, with salvos by the battleships *Kirishima*, *Kongo* and *Haruna*, the heavy cruisers *Tone* and *Maya*, and finally, a booming attack fired off by *Yamato*. They were unopposed, as the only Allied naval presence in the whole region was limited to the cruiser *Chester* and destroyers *Dale* and *Hull* at Suva that had been refitting with new radar equipment delivered earlier. They got no orders to sortie that morning.

It was a surface action group that could not have been challenged, even if Halsey's entire cruiser escort had been present. Given that his carriers were still far to the north approaching the Ellice Islands, the Japanese would have absolute naval supremacy during the invasion.

Major-General Koichi Abe's veteran 47th Regiment began its landings in the narrow coral fringed channel leading to the port, which was hotly defended in spite of the pounding delivered by those ships. 3rd Battalion landed first, storming onto the quays and docks, but was soon pinned down by withering machinegun fire from well sited positions in the buildings

adjacent to the harbor. Fires were already beginning in the town where the initial bombardment had fallen most heavily. But it was not until 1st Battalion landed on the narrow coastal strip between the town and Vunda Point to the south that the deadlock at the harbor began to break up.

Japanese troops rushed into the warehouses, bayonets fixed, and killed anyone they found, whether or not they had a weapon or uniform on. They then infiltrated into the town as the Kiwis attempted to regroup, and were soon stopped again with the timely arrival of the 36th Battalion from 8th Brigade, which had been moving to the scene for the last hour. This force was strong enough to counterattack, and soon the Japanese found themselves being pushed back toward the wharf and warehouse sector.

Major-General Abe was finally ashore, and he wasted no time reorganizing a renewed attack, gathering all three of his battalions to make the push. It was going to be a shock attack, with the veteran Japanese infantry advancing with fixed bayonets into the very fluid house to house fighting that was now underway.

Meanwhile the 48th Cav Recon Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Kuro Kitamura, was landing well to the south in Nandi Bay with his raiding force. He had fast troops with light vehicles, and even horses to give the infantry element additional mobility in the rugged inland country. Before they would land, the battleships *Kirishima* and *Haruna* were detached from the bombardment group and met up with the heavy cruisers *Tone*, *Chokai* and *Kinagusa* in Nandi Bay. Their fire was mainly concentrated at the port of Nandi itself, the adjacent airfield, and shore batteries that had been positioned to oppose a direct landing there.

The 6-inch shore batteries positioned in well fortified sites along that coast began to return fire, and a small duel began when the two batteries protecting Nandi Bay returned fire on the Japanese warships. A heavy mist lay over the bay, obscuring the positions of the enemy ships, which could only be identified when they fired. Well to the south, Kitamura's men were already ashore and pushing into lightly cultivated ground south of Nandi. The enemy transports had not been seen, and so the opening bombardment had served as a big distraction, focusing the Kiwis defensive response right there near the harbor.

Kitamura's first objective would be the small airstrip at Momi, defended by 1st Company, 35th Battalion of the 8th New Zealand Brigade. These

troops had only just arrived on the scene, having been posted much further south at another possible enemy landing point, Likuri Harbor. The battalion there had detached this company to scout up the coast along the rail line that had been built from Nawa on the south coast to Nandi. They arrived just as Kitamura's raiders made their push for Momi Airfield, and a brisk meeting engagement ensued. Outnumbered three to one, the Kiwis held for as long as they could, but within an hour they had been relentlessly driven back from the airfield and forced to retreat into the jungle.

All these early landings were further supported by a daring raid by the elite *Rikusentai* paratroopers of the 1st and 3rd Yokosuka SNLF battalions. Flying out of Noumea, these veteran troops had already fought in Borneo, at Kupang in West Timor, where they suffered severe casualties, and in the ill fated operations against Sumatra and Java. The survivors had been reinforced with fresh replacements from Japan, and flew by night all the way from Rabaul to Luganville on the French controlled island of Vanuatu in the New Hebrides. The Ki-57 Troop transport planes had just enough range to make the trip, and the French had agreed to refuel the planes that night, making them ready for the final leg of their journey by air to the Fiji Islands, another 700 air miles.

Along the way the transports had been escorted by fighters off the *Zuiho*, which was now arriving on the scene of the action after coming all the way from the Solomon Sea south of Port Moresby. The careful planning and coordination of this operation was something that was simply beyond the capabilities of the Allies at this time. Like a fighter that had been dropped in the first round, pummeled on the ropes and staggered in the early going, the Allies were still covering up on defense as Japan moved in for the battle they hoped would clinch the fight in a knockout.

While this was going on, the second regiment scheduled to make the Fiji assault landing was still at sea, navigating the treacherous gaps between long coral reefs that surrounded most of the island group. Major General Shizuo Sakaguchi was leading his regimental sized detachment to the far north of the island, intending to land near the small port of Tavua. Even as the paratroopers of the 1st Yokosuka SNLF landed about seven kilometers to the east of that harbor, his transports were threading their way into the narrow Manava Passage leading to the port. They would be supported by naval gunfire from the heavy cruiser *Aoba* and a fist full of destroyers that were

already in a hot gun battle with a battery of Kiwi coastal artillery.

For the Allies, with many miles of coastline to watch and defend, it was a frustrating morning. They could not make any major redeployment of ground troops because the Japanese could land anywhere they pleased, so the entire US 132nd Infantry Regiment was simply ordered to hunker down on the ground it held along the southern coast of the island, mostly around Suva Bay.

This was a former National Guard Regiment, that had come a long way from Camp Forest in Tennessee, loaded aboard trains guarded by FBI agents in those early fearful days of the war, and then onto transports in Task Force 6814 bound for Australia. It was to become the first regiment of what would soon be called the “Pacifica Division” in this history, and it was going to get but a brief respite before its baptism by fire would begin.

The troops had already seen the white winged Japanese fighters overhead, some swooping down to strafe their position near Suva, and then the Vals came in, their bombs whistling down to strike the anchorage sector. It was their own mini version of Pearl Harbor, made by airmen off two carriers that had been in on that raid months earlier. Informed by *Takami* that the seas and skies were clear, the pilots off *Akagi* and *Soryu* were free to impose their reign of steel over the island. If Nimitz had not diverted Halsey, this action might have met a strong challenge from the planes off *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. But Nimitz was playing a different game now, carefully husbanding his remaining pieces on the board, and planning to mount a counterattack once the Japanese carriers had run out their lease on these waters.

As it seemed clear that the other big island of Vanua Levu was not being targeted, the only move the US made was to transfer several squadrons of A-24 Banshees from Pago Pago, which was now a beehive of activity in Samoa. The Americans already had a full Marine Regiment there, with several more on the water heading for that location. They were being covered by the *Wasp* and light carrier *Shiloh*, and with them would come a new battleship division sent all the way from the east coast, newcomers *Washington*, and the newly commissioned *North Carolina*.

These two ships were the first foray made by US designers into the art of the ‘fast battleship.’ The US had seen the Japanese building the *Kongo* class battlecruisers, and someone suggested they were intended to run with their carriers. Since all the older US battleships were too slow for such a role, the

North Carolina Class was conceived. Originally designed to carry twelve 14-inch guns, the main armament was ‘upgraded’ when Japan reneged on the Washington Naval Treaty. So these new ships would now carry nine 16-inch guns, while still being able to make 28 knots, fast enough to stay with the carriers, or to serve as a formidable commerce raider. They were going to be over 45,000 tons full load, and the icing on the cake was the first appearance of the class of 39, the *South Dakota*.

A new class, this ship had corrected several shortcomings perceived in the *North Carolinas*, which would end their run with the *Washington*. They were given better underwater protection with the main belt extended well below the water line, and a double bottom. Conceived as a flagship vessel, the ship also got a new deck on the conning tower to make room for command staff, and in spite of the added weight, it still maintained a speed of 27 knots. *South Dakota* was to be the first of four in the class, and it was being delivered to the fleet about 90 days early, a much needed reinforcement.

So there was a method to the madness in those orders Halsey received from Fleet Headquarters. Nimitz was mustering all the muscle he had in the deep South Pacific. He was going to build a fast carrier group with *Enterprise*, *Hornet*, *Wasp*, and the light carrier *Shiloh*, and he was going to add considerably more firepower with the addition of these three new battleships. The Marines were all huddled aboard what was now being called “The Presidential Convoy” heading for Pago Pago. It was called this firstly because it sailed on Roosevelt’s direct order, and secondly because the transports that carried the troops all bore the names of past US Presidents.

With the 1st US Marine Division soon to arrive in Samoa, the US was going to have some punching power for their first real offensive of the war. The only question now was where that punch should be aimed. The Japanese were already wading into the shallows of the Solomon Island Group, though their presence there was strongest in the north on Bougainville. They had begun setting up a seaplane base at Tulagi, and put small survey detachments ashore at Lunga on Guadalcanal and a few other nearby islands, looking for the best places to build airfields.

Admiral King was eager to get in the fight, and largely responsible for making sure the 132nd Regiment got to Fiji as it did. Now he wanted his Marines to get busy, and flatly stated that to go anywhere other than Fiji would be most unwise.

“We need Fiji’s airfields and harbors, and now that the enemy is already there, that’s where we should hit them,” he said in a meeting of the Joint Chiefs.

“What about something a little more daring?” said Marshall. “The 132nd Regiment is already on Fiji, and we could hold our ground and keep the Japanese busy there. Then we could swing north and hit the New Hebrides. Take this island—” He fingered the big Island of Vanuatu, “right in the center of the board. In effect, we’d be outflanking the Japanese at both Fiji and Noumea once we got airfields and good air support established at Luganville. And from there we can also cover the Santa Cruz Islands and springboard into the lower Solomons. As serious as these penetrations are with the enemy on New Caledonia and Fiji, the Japs are out on a limb. If they want to supply those troops they’ll have to come down through the Solomon and Coral Seas, and from Luganville, we’d have a base that could keep a watch on both those approaches.”

“Right,” said King. “Then how do we keep Luganville supplied if the Japs have planes on both Fiji and Noumea? General, those bases have to be taken, no if, ands, or buts about it.”

It was going to be much debated before a decision would be reached, and the matter would eventually end up in Roosevelt’s lap again. At the moment, however, the fate of Fiji itself still rode in the whirlwind. It looked like Operation FS was going to be a complete success. Hara’s 5th Carrier Division had met and all but destroyed Fletcher’s Task Force in the Coral Sea. Port Moresby had been invaded and secured in five days time, the base at Tulagi was unchallenged, and troops were already safely ashore on the main island of the Fiji Group.

“We have done all of this, I might add,” said Admiral Ugaki, “without any magic tricks by that ship out there.”

“Don’t underestimate them just yet,” said Yamamoto. “The situational awareness they provide has been most useful, even if it has not been necessary for them to use those advanced rocket weapons. I remind you that we can operate now with such impunity only because they have assured us no enemy task force is within striking range of our forces.”

“Where do you think those other enemy carriers have gone?” asked Ugaki.

“The losses they sustained in the Coral Sea had to shake them,” said

Yamamoto. "It is my feeling that they were planning a two pronged attack, only their left pincer was shattered by our 5th Carrier Division. We paid a price for that in losing the *Soaring Crane*, and now *Lucky Crane* has withdrawn to Rabaul, so the real effect of that battle was to remove all four carriers from the plotting table."

"Yet we will have *Zuikaku* back in a week's time," said Ugaki.

"Yes, but there are still three American fleet carriers in the Pacific. I believe they will consolidate now, as they cannot afford to face us on even equal terms after this loss. The battle in the Coral Sea taught them that, so I find the silence after those raids in the Marshalls to be somewhat ominous."

"That was nothing," said Ugaki. "In fact, I believe those raids were meant as a mere diversion while that other American task force attempted to ambush us. Thankfully Hara's pilots took care of that."

Yamamoto nodded, but looked at the report on his desk detailing plane and pilot losses from the sinking of *Shokaku*. It could have been worse. Many on the ship were safely rescued at sea, and those in the air that survived the attack were able to land on *Zuikaku*. Yet we were perhaps one 500 pound bomb away from suffering the same disastrous loss the Americans took. What if they had hit *Zuikaku*'s flight deck? None of those planes would have been recovered, and I would be inscribing a good many more names on that plaque aboard *Akagi*.

So now we lose our second fleet carrier. Thankfully we will have *Kaga* back in service soon after her repair and refit. The *Kido Butai* remains strong in spite of these losses, but I must be very careful in the days ahead. The Americans are now like a coiled spring. They must strike us somewhere, and I must learn what they are planning. I do not think I will find the answer in the library aboard *Takami*. Everything here is now vastly different from that history. So we will fight it the old fashioned way, with blood and steel on the seas, and our brave pilots in the skies above. If the Americans do strike us soon, then we will see what this strange new ship can really do. The war may be decided on the outcome of the next major battle, and I must win it... or die trying.

Chapter 20

16 April, 1942

By the morning of the second day the situation on the north and west coast of the main island was starting to look grim. The Kiwis had fought hard, with the village of Lautoko north of Nandi changing hands twice in the long days fighting. The key factor, however, was the complete control of the sea and skies around the island. Japanese cruisers with powerful 8-inch guns were able to weigh in heavily on the fighting along the western shores, and by nightfall, the haggard Kiwis were starting to call Nandi Bay ‘Battleship Row.’ *Kongo*, *Kirishima* and *Haruna* had sat out there all day, pounding any location where they could get a good fire order from shore based spotters. Those heavy rounds were simply too much for the infantry to endure, and the New Zealanders were forced to withdraw into the heavily wooded interior to gain positions where the Japanese could not easily call in those guns.

The problem with that strategy was that all their stores and supplies had been in those positions along the coast. The Japanese now had all the ports on the west coast they had been after, clearing Nandi and Lautoka, and the Sakaguchi Regiment had secured Tavua in the north. Brigadier Robert Row had the 8th Brigade, and he huddled with Brigadier Lawrence Potter of 14th Brigade to see what could be done. Potter had been literally holed up in his underground communications center and headquarters at a place called ‘Black Rock,’ a fortified post hacked out of the stone by the Kiwi engineers a month earlier.

“We’ve lost our main objective,” said Potter. “Now that they’ve taken the aerodrome at Nandi, there’s nothing else of real military importance between here and Suva. The Yanks have some engineers in the south hammering out emergency airstrips along Queen’s Road, but we won’t do much good here, and not under those naval guns.”

“Agreed,” said Row. He had fought his battalions well, and would later become a tenacious factor in the battle for this island, so much so that the Americans came to respect and admire the Kiwis. They had once called the heart of the batting order for their beloved New York Yankees Murders Row,

and now, after seeing the Kiwis fight, they started calling them “Row’s Murderers.” It had taken the entire Abe Detachment, reinforced with the 4th Yokosuka SNLF battalion and the 48th Cavalry Regiment to dislodge the New Zealanders from their positions around Nandi Bay, but now that fight was over.

“Look,” said Brigadier Row. “There’s only one good road inland to get us down to the south coast and Queen’s Road. We can’t sit here in the jungle. I say we get to that road and hoof it south. It’s our only play.”

“I hate to give up such plush accommodations,” said Potter looking around the roughly hewn cave site at Black Rock. “But I can’t see any other course of action.” So the orders were given to withdraw the New Zealand Brigades south and east. In effect, the only game in town now was going to be the vital port and airfields around Suva Bay, and that was all that would matter until significant reinforcements permitted offensive operations. Gone were the early days where the men would wallow in the mud of the cricket and football fields near Camp Namaka. Now the war had finally come to their island, and they were in it up to their hips.

It was going to be a long, hard trek inland to that road, and then difficult going in the higher country as it wound its way through the hills, following the course of the Singatana River to the south coast of the island. What was left of the garrison at the small Likuri Harbor would meet them at the mouth of that river near the village of Nayawa. That had been an American post, but General Krueger, the overall commander of all forces in Fiji and Samoa, had decided the position could be too easily outflanked by enemy troops coming down that road. So he sent an order to Patch to pull his troops out, the Regimental Engineers, and a battalion of Aviation Engineers that had been working on a small airstrip. They marched east along Queen’s road, which would follow the entire southern coast of the island all the way to Suva.

The Kiwis would follow the Yanks east along that road, and Krueger asked for a meeting with the two Brigadiers to coordinate the defense they now had to plan.

“We gave them a good fight,” said Potter, “but the thing is this, we had to be at every place along that coast that provided a suitable landing point, and they could pick and choose any spot they want, and then hit it with an entire regiment. By the time we moved in supporting troops, they were already well established ashore. It was just impossible to hold on the coast under that

naval gunfire, so you end up withdrawing inland.”

“Well how do we avoid that down here?” asked Krueger.

“That’s easy enough—you need your damn navy to stop them if they come by sea. As long as they control the seas, you’ll always be looking over your shoulder wondering where they’ll put men ashore. Only a strong navy or air force presence can neutralize that advantage. Do that, and I think we can go toe to toe with them on the ground.”

“Well you just get your boys safely into our end of the island and I’ll see about that naval support.” Krueger was Army through and through, rising all the way from Private to his current rank of Major General. Born in Prussia in 1881, he had fought in the Spanish American War, and the Philippine American War that followed. In the first World War he was chief of staff for the US 84th Division, and later served in that same role in the Tank Corps. In training exercises known as “The Louisiana Maneuvers” in the States before the war, Krueger had requested the services of an enterprising staff officer to help him run his VII Corps, Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower. He shined in those maneuvers, employing the very able services of another man with a fated path before him in this war, one George S. Patton, who was commanding the 2nd Armored Division at that time.

Yet it was MacArthur who would ask for Krueger to fight with him in the Pacific, in spite of his age of 60 years when the war broke out. In Fedorov’s history, Krueger would do exactly that, fighting his way “From Down Under to Nippon,” which became the title of his memoirs of the war. This time, his battles would begin right there on Fiji, and that journey would take him to some very unexpected places. A careful man, Krueger had a methodical style of command, taking risks only when they were necessary. If he had been a chess master, he would have favored positional play, building his strategy around his pawn structure, trading pieces in the middle game, and then playing the endgame like a machine to push one of those pawns home to become a Queen.

Here, in these Altered States, he would get his chance to ply his operational art, but at this early date in April of 1942, that endgame was very far away. In the world this one was born from, MacArthur once wrote a very fitting tribute to Krueger saying: “History has not given him due credit for his greatness. I do not believe that the annals of American history have shown his superior as an Army commander. Swift and sure in the attack, tenacious

and determined in defense, modest and restrained in victory—I do not know what he would have been in defeat, because he was never defeated.”

So it was that the man who never tasted defeat would now face an army that had seen nothing but one successive victory after another. Another methodical man had stopped the Japanese briefly on the island of Singapore, this time it would be Krueger’s turn to see if he could stem the tide.

* * *

Nimitz was playing a very cagey game, but he was driving Admiral Halsey to utter frustration as he waited for the *Cimarron* to come on station for the planned replenishment operation. The *Wasp* and *Shiloh* were also still heading south, and so Halsey frittered and fretted through the 16th and 17th, topping off his destroyers, listening to reports of the ground action on Fiji, and getting more and more restless with each day. He wanted to get down there and give the defenders of Fiji something to cheer about, but Fleet HQ was adamant—no combat sortie was authorized until the task force had been strengthened with the arrival of the *Wasp* group under Captain John Reeves.

Orders were orders, whether you liked them or not, and Halsey chewed on the reins for another day, receiving one more signal clarifying what Nimitz wanted him to do. He was to replenish, screen the western approaches to Pago Pago, and then reorganize his task force for offensive operation after the arrival of *Wasp*. The Americans were waiting on those transports in the Presidential Convoy, waiting on those three shiny new fast battleships, and waiting on the *Wasp*. Decisions had been made higher up that while Fiji was clearly in jeopardy now, it was not yet in real danger of falling to the enemy. Krueger had the whole of the Pacifica Division there now, and therefore any real offensive would simply have to wait for the Marines to get sorted out on Pago Pago.

It was a strategy of necessity, for Nimitz could see no other viable option, and since the employment of his naval assets would be vital to any offensive the Army and Marines could plan, he had to husband those precious ships and planes, and preserve their striking power. The plan was to carry the enemy here through the middle rounds, lay on the ropes, stay out of reach of his strong right hand in that dangerous carrier force off Fiji—and it worked.

On the night of the 18th of April, Yamamoto met with Ugaki to consider

their situation. The expected arrival of the remaining American carriers had not happened. 1st Carrier Division had hovered off Nandi Bay, pounded ground troops, the airfield and port at Suva, but now their own supply situation was going to force Yamamoto to make a decision.

“I believe the Americans have made a strategic withdrawal with their remaining carriers,” he said. “We have waited here three days, fulfilling our primary role in supporting the Army in this invasion. Now that they are well established ashore, our next consideration will be how to keep them supplied.”

“I have already spoken with 17th Army Headquarters,” said Ugaki. “The Tanaka Detachment is now formed up at Rabaul and preparing to get seaborne. It was necessary to wait for the return of the MO troop transports to provide the necessary sealift. Unfortunately, we lost several transports in that action off Port Moresby, two to enemy shore batteries, and a third was sunk by a submarine. To compensate for these losses, I have recalled the transports from Tulagi to Rabaul as well. That should give us the lift required to get Tanaka moving this way.”

“What is the situation on the ground?”

“We control the north and west coasts, several small ports and the airfields at Nandi and Momi. The enemy still holds the south and east coast, though they appear to be consolidating around Suva.”

“Were we wise to land where we did instead of making a direct attack against that port?”

“That was the Army’s choice. They believed that once ashore, Suva could be taken from the landward side. That remains the plan, and our forces are probing the enemy defenses to determine their strength.”

“Then the Tanaka Detachment will land at Nandi Bay?”

“Correct, but that can be re-evaluated later.”

“Yes, but we cannot wait here any longer. Our destroyers are thirsty, and we have used a good deal of aviation fuel and munitions in these ground support operations. It will be necessary to take 1st Carrier Division out of theater to replenish.”

“Now sir? But what about the American carriers?”

“What about them? *Takami* reports they have no sign of any threat within 500 miles, and they have flown off search missions with those helicopters of theirs equipped with advanced radar. The enemy has withdrawn.”

Ugaki narrowed his eyes. "They are undoubtedly waiting for us to do exactly what you propose."

"That appears to be the case. The loss of those two carriers in the Coral Sea must have been very sobering. It is clear they were not willing to risk their remaining carriers in an engagement here after that. So we will leave tonight."

"For Truk?"

"Rabaul. That is where *Zuikaku* has retired for minor repairs, and that ship should be ready for renewed operations by the time we arrive there. What is the timetable regarding the Tanaka Detachment?"

"They will need about five days to pack and load."

"Very well. That will give us the time we need to get to Rabaul. I assume there are sufficient stores of fuel there?"

"They just received tanker support from Japan. That will not be an issue."

"Good. Then our plan will be to reform the *Kido Butai* at Rabaul in five days time, then we will sortie as the covering force for Tanaka's convoy. The *Zuiho* group will linger here one more day, then follow in our wake. Has the Shoji Detachment been sent to New Caledonia?"

"Not yet sir. It remains on Bougainville, until we can free up more shipping."

Yamamoto smiled. "We make our plans to ride off on our carriers and battleships to find and defeat our enemies, but this war will be won or lost on the backs of those merchant ships. Thus far, this operation has gone very well. It is now ours to see that the troops we deliver get the supplies they need. Do not be deluded by the absence of the American carriers. There is more behind this than fear of engagement here, though that was certainly a factor in their thinking. They are building up as much strength as possible before they move. There is more going on than we may realize."

"You suspect the Americans are planning an offensive?"

"What would you be planning under these circumstances? Naval intelligence has recently informed us that they now believe the Americans have at least three full divisions in this theater. One is here on Fiji, another is mustering in New Zealand, and the third is believed to be a unit composed of Naval Marines. If those troops are anywhere as good as our own SNLF battalions, then they are here for one reason—counterattack. I believe they will defend Fiji stubbornly, using the forces they have there like a shield, and

these Marines—they are the sword.”

“Then it must be shattered,” said Ugaki.

“Yes, but to parry the blow I believe is coming, we must first know where they will strike. When I was on that ship, Ugaki, I saw things in their library that were very disturbing. I believe this unit is the 1st US Marine Division, and in the material I read, the Americans used it to counter our occupation of Guadalcanal in the lower Solomons.”

“Guadalcanal? Near our new seaplane base at Tulagi? We took that because it was the best anchorage in the Solomons. There is nothing on Guadalcanal but jungle and mosquitoes.”

“At the moment...” Yamamoto stared out the port hole, watching the play of the moonlight on the water. “Those books I read tell another story,” he said slowly. “There was an airfield built near Lunga, first by us, and then by the Americans after they captured it from us. They came to call it Henderson Field.”

“What? On Guadalcanal? They could never take that now. They have no logistical base close enough to sustain such an operation.”

“Perhaps so... But this 1st Marine Division landed there, and soon there were more than mosquitoes on that island. Our entire 2nd Division went there to try and throw them off, and was largely destroyed before we were eventually forced to... redeploy elsewhere. No, I will say it the way it was—until we were forced to withdraw.”

“That could never happen now, Admiral.”

“Are you so certain?”

Yamamoto stood up, hands clasped behind his back as he stared at the sea. “See that all ships in the task force receive orders to move at 22:00.”

Chapter 21

Major General Alexander A. Vandegrift was a quiet, soft spoken and self effacing man for the role he would assume—commander of the US 1st Marine Division, now hastily assembling at Pago Pago in the Samoa Islands. Making Lieutenant in the Marines in 1909, he had seen his first combat three years later in Nicaragua, and at Vera Cruz in 1914. He then fought in the humid jungle and hill country of Haiti, chasing down the Caco Bandits while gaining much experience in special operations and jungle fighting.

His boys were here in the Pacific a full month early, the 5th Regiment arriving in early April, and now joined by the 1st and 7th Regiments on the Presidential Convoy. Instead of sailing to New Zealand, they had stopped right there in Samoa. The enemy was already on Fiji, and the excellent harbor at Pago Pago had to be defended, so there was no time for deployment to New Zealand and the six months of training Vandegrift thought he would have before the division went on the offensive.

Admiral King wanted action now, and his arguments that trying to send the Marines on a risky amphibious assault operation to a place like Espiritu Santo, or even Guadalcanal, as Marshall suggested was too dangerous to contemplate.

“We’re down to three fleet carriers,” he said. “You stick your neck out that far, and Halsey will have to linger in the invasion zone for days, which means there would be a strong likelihood of another fight with the enemy carriers that took down Fletcher. But have a look at the alternative: we’ve already got fresh planes arriving for Fiji. Halsey is there now, and with three new battleships to give him some more muscle. We control Suva, and the Marines can land right there. We also have airfields on Vanua Levu in close supporting range of any operation on Fiji’s main island. The Jap carriers have had to withdraw to replenish, and that gives us a window of opportunity that we simply cannot throw away. I say Halsey can take his entire carrier force down there, establish air superiority, and we can then get the Marines ashore there with little or no risk. We already have Patch and the entire 23rd Pacifica Division. You send in the Old Breed now in the 1st Marine Division, and we can send the Japs back to tell Tojo just how bad they got licked out there.”

Roosevelt listened, his pipe askance, dangling from his prominent jaw, and just the glint of satisfaction in his eyes. King was the fiery heart of the Navy, an irascible, abrasive and choleric man that was quick to anger, and often disliked by subordinates for that reason. King knew that of himself, but never apologized for it. “When the going gets tough,” he once said, “they send for the sons-of-bitches.” King filled the bill nicely.

“Then we’ll have Fiji,” King pressed on. “Then we’ll have a strong base to plan the offensive into the New Hebrides.”

“What about that Jap base at Tulagi?” Marshall reminded him.

“What about it? Naval Intelligence thinks the Japanese have no more than 3000 men in the lower Solomons, mostly service troops, and six seaplanes. Nimitz suggested we could send the 1st Raider Battalion there if need be, but I don’t see the threat. What I do see is a clear and present danger on Fiji. The Japs already have at least three regiments there, and you can bet more will be on the way. They’ve already got several airfields, and they can ferry in planes from Noumea. If we let them get dug in there, mark my words, we’re going to regret it. We have to hit them now, and with everything we have.”

“Are the Marines ready?” asked Roosevelt.

King smiled. “Always ready,” he said. “That’s the motto. And now the Presidential convoy has safely delivered the 1st and 7th Regiments to Pago Pago. I say we turn them loose on Fiji at the first opportunity, and I don’t want to hear any mealy mouthed talk about the boys needing training before they go in. They’ll learn the hard way, right there on Fiji.”

Roosevelt smiled. “Admiral,” he said. “I like your enthusiasm. We’ve sat on our heels for nearly six months now, and that business in the Coral Sea was a warning—we could lose this thing if we don’t do something to stop the other fellow. So I’m inclined to agree with you. I think Fiji should be the target, and you have my full authorization to proceed as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Mister President. You won’t regret that decision, I assure you.”

“Just assure me that you’ll kick the Japanese off Fiji, and I’ll be more than happy.”

So the die was cast, and the target of the first US ground offensive of the war was now set in stone—Fiji, not Guadalcanal, and it would come much sooner, in later April instead of August. Vandegrift was worried he could not get his troops ready, but realizing he had a harbor to debark at Suva was a big

plus.

“We’ve only got amphibious assault craft to lift one regiment, and so I intend to use it on that northeast coast. The other regiments can make the run into Suva Bay, and this time the navy had better be there.”

The General did not have to worry about that, King assured him. Another son-of-a-bitch was on the scene, and Halsey was itching to get into this fight. With new orders finally within his grasp, Halsey was ready to go. On the night of April 25th, he was authorized to proceed to ‘seize control of the sea and airspace around the Fiji Island Group, neutralize enemy controlled airfields on Viti Levu, and assure the safe landing and transport of elements of the 1st US Marine Division.’ He was only too happy to comply.

* * *

Far to the north, the heavy rounded bow of the icebreaker *Siberiakov* was slowly churning its way through the remnants of the pack ice in the Sea of Okhotsk. The ship was working with the *Oktyabr*, *Krasin* and *Yermak*, all ships “borrowed” from the Soviet Northern Fleet for this mission. Together they were able to forge a pathway wide enough to permit the transports behind them to follow slowly in their icy wake.

It was a very hazardous mission, undertaken at night in the dark of the moon to minimize the possibility of discovery. The watchmen strained to see ahead, trying to spot hidden bergs in the floes of pack ice. They would bob up and down sometimes hidden beneath the water. Others watched the dark starlit skies, fearing they would be found and attacked by Japanese planes on lower Sakhalin Island. Vladimir Karpov had told the Captains not to worry about that, but many of these men had never seen *Kirov* in action, and knew very little about the ship or its astounding capabilities.

Kirov had re-entered the Sea of Okhotsk for this escort mission, for behind those icebreakers the precious transport fleet was carrying a full regiment of the Siberian 32nd Rifle Division, the strongest reinforcement yet for the small airborne force that had been lifted months earlier by Airship. No enemy naval presence was expected, but the ship was there to prevent any possible attack by enemy aircraft the following morning, once the landing had been reported to the enemy further south. Ice in the narrow channel between Sakhalin and the mainland was still too heavy in the north, but on the eastern

coast, it had been thinning enough to allow for this daring surprise attack.

As much as the Japanese might have expected the enemy to come, this was not a night for war in the icy north. The Siberians had made no attempt to push south from the small enclave they controlled at the northernmost segment of the island, but Karpov wanted a port, no matter how small, and the only facility in any way suitable was the small port of Okha. That was where those icebreakers were heading that night, with the wind up, a frigid chill in the air, and cold darkness as thick as the ice fog that drifted in a frosty haze over the floes.

At that same moment, Vladimir the Young was also leading a flotilla of airships south. Their objective was any enemy airstrip that had been cleared by the Japanese late last fall, before the ice and snow made operations there impossible. They were carrying another wave of Karpov's elite Air Guardsmen, and a key objective was the eastern landward approach to the vital ferry site near Lazarev. That was not only another viable port on the west coast of the island, but also the primary link between Northern Sakhalin and the mainland. Companies of Cossack irregulars were loping out of the heavy woodlands, also heading for that location on the mainland side of the channel. The plan was to seize that ferry before the Japanese even knew it was under attack.

The airships hovered like vast sea creatures over the frozen white landscape, every gun port manned, and the *Oko* panels ceaselessly turning to look for any sign of the enemy in the dark starry skies. Long cold ropes extended like tentacles from the looming beasts, and down them came the leading edge of the Air Guard, all dressed in snow parkas, their rifles and submachine guns slung over their backs. The sub-cloud cars were creaking in the cold as they lowered on coiled steel cables laden with skis and equipment for the troops.

The tough Naval Marines that had landed months earlier to secure the small enclave in the north were now up from their fortified border positions and moving stealthily forward. Before the sun would rise in the white morning haze, Karpov would have units in motion all over Northern Sakhalin Island. He would seize that port, cut the rail line further south, secure three airstrip sites, and the vital Lazarev Ferry. In doing so, he would also cut off the site where Japanese oilfield engineers were laboring to drill through the frozen ground to find that much needed oil.

The attack was coming a full month before the Japanese ever thought it could be mounted. Once again, Tojo and the High Command had completely underestimated the Siberians capabilities, and the sudden invasion, along with an unexpected development on Fiji, was now going to force Admiral Yamamoto to make a very difficult decision.

* * *

Halsey had moved as ordered, slipping down to the Fijis and sending his considerable air wing in to pound the Japanese. A squadron of planes that had been flown off the *Hiyo* to Noumea the previous January were the unlucky group that met the American Wildcats. There were only 12 A5M Claudes in the fighter group, and an equal number of D3A Vals up that day, and they were going to run into Lt. Gray and Fighting 6 off the *Enterprise*. The US carriers now enjoyed a windfall with many pilots recovered from the Lexington the previous year off Hawaii. One of them was Lieutenant Gordon Firebaugh, a competent flyer with a knack for making smart evasive maneuvers to foil enemy gun passes, and then getting after them with his own MGs in short order.

Firebaugh led a section of VF-6 that had some very other talented pilots, including Machinist Donald Runyon, who knew his plane inside and out, from the engine to the hydraulics and every moving part. It was as if his inherent knowledge of the machine itself translated into knowhow in using it. He seemed to know just how fast he could make a turn, when to best apply flaps, and how much power to give the engine. He was going to be one of the very best in VF-6, and started making his first kills that day against those Claudes. Lt. Lou Bauer was also up that day, a man who was in line to succeed Grey as the Squadron Leader. He and his wing mate Howard Packard were eager to find some action.

When they encountered the thin enemy CAP over Nandi, the Americans had a feast, downing 4 Claudes in little time and sending the rest home. The bombing that followed made that landing a hazardous one, and any of the AM5s that had been on station took an equal pounding from the SBD pilots. Airfields were easy targets, and the US planes put over twenty holes in the runway near Nandi. In a matter of 45 minutes, Halsey had put that base, and most of the planes there, out of commission.

The enemy air threat dealt with, the SBD's soon went to work on the port facilities near Nandi Bay. The last of the Japanese transports were already well out to sea, escorted by heavy cruisers *Mogami* and *Maya*, but that was the only Japanese naval surface threat still around the islands. When they learned that enemy carrier planes were attacking at Nandi Bay, the only wise thing they could do was continue withdrawing to Noumea at their best speed. Two damaged transports that had been beached along the shore were also going to remain there permanently. What was left of the docks and quays there and at the smaller port of Tauva to the north were blasted apart and set on fire. The old shore battery positions once occupied by the Kiwis got another good working over, and any concentration of Japanese troops, tents, or vehicles were all fair game.

The appearance of this overwhelming air power was quite a boost to the morale of the disheartened Kiwi forces that had made the long retreat to the southern coast. They had been grumbling that the Americans seemed to always be one step ahead of them, falling back towards Suva. "The Yanks haven't got the stomach for this," said one Sergeant—until he saw those beautiful blue planes come in, wings wagging, and the bombs whistling down on the enemy behind them.

To make matters worse for the enemy, the US battleships and escorting cruisers were authorized to make a visit to the enemy that night. In a reverse of the fate suffered by the Marines on Guadalcanal, enduring the pounding by Japanese battleships which came down the Slot each night, now it was the enemy taking the beating from those big new 16-inch guns. After this heavy one-two punch on the 26th and 27th of April, the Japanese could say they still held most of the western portion of Viti Levu, but the facilities and airfields they had come to capture, the bases they would need to support and sustain operations, had been badly damaged.

Halsey and the Navy had taken the fight right to the enemy, and it felt good to be dishing it out instead of receiving for a change. And ready or not, Vandegrift now had three regiments of Marines on the Presidential Convoy, and they were heading for Suva Bay. Once ashore, they would nearly double the Allied troop strength on the ground, and soon the hunters would become the hunted. The hardened Japanese troops were about to encounter much stiffer odds than they expected, but they were still intent on continuing their offensive operation.

That was both a common trait and shortcoming when Japanese land operations were concerned. The seasoned Army troops and their commanders had tasted nothing but one victory after another. The men of the Abe Detachment, for example, had first become veterans in China, where their division gained a reputation for ferocity and atrocity. They then bested one US and Pilipino unit after another on the Philippines, and easily subdued the Dutch on Java when they stormed ashore near Surabaya. They were tough troops, offensive minded, and with a preference for infiltrating, enfilading and attacking, even against positions that had not been well scouted.

If the Japanese had known that there was already a full US division at Suva, and that it was about to be reinforced by the Old Breed in a matter of days, they might have hesitated and begun digging in to fixed fortifications. Yet at this point in the war, the Japanese had literally 'nothing to fear.' They were soon about to learn that these US divisions were going to be well armed, well led, and determined to reverse the sliding fortunes of the Allied cause in this war. The Japanese had thought they were playing their endgame to a sure and certain conclusion with this invasion. The pawns the US had husbanded throughout the early months of the war were still green, but they were now about to be crowned and become powerful new and unexpected forces on the board.

Part VIII

High Tide

“When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, till it seems as though you could not hold on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.”

— Harriot Breecher Stowe

Chapter 22

Yamamoto sat at the head of the conference table, a gathering of several key officers meeting aboard *Yamato* to determine the next phase of the operational planning for Fiji-Samoa. Admiral Hara was present, to report on the recently concluded Coral Sea action, and General Hitochi Imamura of the 8th Area Army was also joined by Lieutenant General Harukichi Hyakutake of the 17th Army. Admiral Ugaki sat in the fourth chair, a heavy sheaf of reports and papers on the table in front of him.

“Gentlemen,” said Yamamoto. “It appears we have a situation developing on two fronts now, and with limited resources to commit to a possible solution to this problem. We have long expected that the enemy would eventually attempt a counterattack. Now it seems we have that at both ends of the rope, and here we sit in the middle.

“I have just received a report from Tokyo,” said Imamura, who was charged with representing the overall interests of the Army for both fronts, since no one else from Tokyo could arrive at Rabaul on such short notice. “Thus far, the enemy landings on Sakhalin are not substantial. Karafuto Command has ordered two battalions of the 25th Infantry Brigade north to reinforce the garrison troops there, but the Army believes the current conditions at sea will still prohibit any major movement of additional enemy forces. That said, they are again not happy that this additional incursion was permitted to proceed unchallenged by the Navy, and they have asked me to formally request stronger naval support in the event additional enemy landings should be forthcoming.”

That sounded suspiciously like the Army again blaming the Navy for what had just happened on Sakhalin, but Yamamoto did not wish to see this meeting become a finger pointing game. “The Navy is more than willing to begin active operations in the north,” he said. “The carrier *Kaga* will complete its refit within the week, and it will join *Tosa* for deployment north. I am not sure how many army planes have been assigned to Karafuto Command, but that carrier division will raise the stakes considerably. Admiral Ugaki?”

By prearranged signal, Ugaki would now convey the details. “Combined

Fleet is allocating Battleship Division 1 to accompany this carrier force, which will be composed of our two newest battleships, *Satsuma* and *Hiraga*. *Nagato* is also on station in the north, but it will be retained at Yokohama. Cruiser Division 3, with *Atago*, *Takao* and *Tone* will depart Rabaul immediately and return to home waters, to join the six light cruisers already stationed there, and there are adequate numbers of destroyers available for duty in the north. Vice Admiral Kurita will also bring the cruisers *Mikuma* and *Mogami* from his 7th Division, but leave *Furutaka* at Rabaul."

"Then no more than two carriers and two battleships will be committed?" Imamura had a checklist he was to run down, and the Army had asked him to lean on things here with his considerable weight. Yet owing his life to the Navy, and having concluded a very cordial meeting with Yamamoto earlier, he was proceeding very diplomatically. "It was suggested that since Karafuto borders one of the home islands, a much stronger naval presence should be allocated to the north."

"Not possible," said Ugaki, without any deference to niceties. "The recent and most unfortunate loss of *Shokaku* in the Coral Sea has left us one carrier light in the south, and now we receive reports of strong enemy carrier action against our landings in the Fiji Island Group. It appears they waited until the *Kido Butai* was withdrawn, being too cowardly to face us directly after Admiral Hara sunk two of their carriers in the Coral Sea." Ugaki had seen old King Kong Hara shift uncomfortably when he first mentioned the loss of *Shokaku*, so now he correctly gave him face.

"Well how many enemy carriers are you facing in the south?"

"We believe there are at least three, as a new ship transited the Panama Canal two weeks ago. They must be challenged and destroyed."

Now General Hyakutake spoke. "Then you intend to proceed with the movement of the remaining detachments of the 48th Division?"

"Assuming the Army has no objection," said Ugaki. "That division was assigned in whole to support Operation FS. Thus far only the Abe Detachment has landed in the Fijis. The delay in getting the remaining two regiments from Java compelled us to commit the Sakaguchi Detachment that was previously scheduled to reinforce Noumea. I assume additional forces are now ready to move?"

"The Tanaka Detachment has already been assigned shipping, which took some time to accumulate here in Rabaul." Hyakutake wanted to make certain

no blame would be laid at the Army's feet with that remark, and Ugaki did not fail to perceive the defensive tone in his voice.

"Regretfully," said Yamamoto, "all these operations have taxed available shipping, but the outcomes have been more than satisfactory. The capture of Port Moresby was most welcome news, and we are now well established on the main Fiji island. We have learned, however, that there are considerable enemy forces in theater. Admiral Ugaki has the latest report."

It had come, in fact, directly from an enterprising Executive Officer aboard *Takami*. Lieutenant Commander Fukada had sought to enrich his relationship with Ugaki by secretly sending him information on the probable buildup of Allied forces in Australia and New Zealand. Now Ugaki could reveal this to the Army for the first time, and present it as if it were the latest intelligence garnered by the Navy.

"We already know that two American divisions are now stationed on the Australian mainland. But there are forces composing at least two other divisions in theater, one from their army, and a second from their Marine Corps. Given that our recent successful landing on Fiji will be most alarming, we see the need for an additional commitment by the Army in the South." There it was, the subtle request, but it was met by the same cold frankness that Ugaki had offered earlier.

"Not possible," said Imamura, senior to Hyakutake and also representing the Army High Command in Tokyo. "And I regret that I am much to blame for that. The loss of our 2nd Division in Western Java was most unfortunate, though who could have foreseen the eruption of that volcano? I suspect, in fact, that it has much to do with the problems now faced by both the Army and Navy. We lost good troops there, and the Navy suffered considerably when all those transports were destroyed. This was an act of the Gods, and therefore no blame should come to either side, but that does not allow me to miraculously produce yet another division for operations here in the South."

"Any more than we can miraculously produce another fleet carrier for operations in the north," said Ugaki.

Before this polite, but firm exchange escalated, Yamamoto spoke again. "Gentlemen. Here we face the situation I warned about earlier—a two front war."

"Don't forget Burma," said Admiral Hara with a grim smile.

"Quite correct." Everyone else nodded. "So we really have a war on three

fronts now, and limitations on the forces available to deal with the situation. The Navy has now lost two fleet carriers; the Army has lost an infantry division. Yet in spite of these setbacks, we have done much harm to the enemy. So let us be realistic now. I understand General Yamashita has been sent to deal with the Siberians?”

“He has been given command of the Amur-Urajio District, with the 8th, 14th and 28th Infantry Divisions pulled from duty in Manchuria and Mongolia. But they cannot move to resolve the situation in the Karafuto Province unless the Navy provides sealift. Otherwise, all they can do is sit on the Amur River Line in a defensive role, which is not what the Army desires. And as long as we are remembering Burma, I must also point out that Karamushiro must be retaken at the earliest opportunity, and again, it will require the Navy in strong support.”

“We have no reservations about providing that support,” said Ugaki. “It is simply a matter of timing. At the moment, we have just been told that the Army does not believe any substantial enemy reinforcement can develop in Karafuto. And we have just informed the Army that the enemy strength in the South is much greater than the planners for Operation FS anticipated. It is therefore our belief that forces already assigned to Karafuto should be sufficient to hold the enemy in check. The Navy will cover any movement of additional troops by sea from Hokkaido or Urajio, and we have allocated forces we deem sufficient for that purpose.”

“What? By sending no more than three additional cruisers? All the other ships you mentioned are already assigned to the north.”

Ugaki reddened a bit, and pressed on. “What about the South? That battle is already underway, and the enemy is obviously intending to fight. The single division assigned is now thought to be inadequate by the Navy, particularly if our latest intelligence is proven to be true. The valor and ability of our troops are not in question here, but I must point out that the forces allocated would be outnumbered four to one.”

“Surprising information,” said Imamura, seeming to diffuse the exchange. “The Army Chiefs were not aware that the enemy buildup had progressed to that level, and I can assure you that I will request a full investigation from Army Intelligence to confirm this.”

That was a double edged statement. On the one side, Imamura seemed to be grateful for the recent Navy intelligence concerning the Allied buildup; on

the other, he was calling it into question by suggesting the Army needed to confirm it. Which side of that blade he really intended to cut with was anyone's to guess, but he said this with a conciliatory tone, further masking the fact that he had clearly looked the gift horse in the mouth where Ugaki's intelligence was concerned. This was the subtle ebb and flow of Japanese manners, where things were said and expressed in roundabout ways, while everyone present knew what each man there was really suggesting.

"May I interject one thing here," said 17th Army Commander Hyakutake. "I suppose it is yet another matter for Naval Intelligence, but we have heard some very strange rumors of late at Rabaul. The first concerns a new Siberian ship that the men on the quays have now come to call *Mizuchi*."

That fell like a stone into a quiet pool of water, and everyone at the table waited to see where the ripples would go before Yamamoto finally spoke again.

"*Mizuchi*... Yes, we have not only heard of this ship, but we have also seen the direct evidence of its alarming capabilities. Neither of you may yet know this, but our carrier, the *Hiryu*, was not sunk because of any damage it sustained during the Pearl Harbor operation. I know this is what the Army may believe, but it is false. That ship was sunk by this *Mizuchi* you mention, and with a very advanced weapon that the Navy is much concerned about."

"Then the rumors are true?"

"The rumors are rumors," said Yamamoto. "What I am telling you is the truth. *Mizuchi* exists, and it is very dangerous. But the Navy is taking the measure of this ship, and I can assure you that we will deal with it."

"I see," said Imamura. "Would such measures have anything to do with the demonstration that took place at Davao recently?"

Again, the silence, and this time Ugaki seemed quite flustered to realize the Army knew what had happened there, but before he said anything more, he looked at Yamamoto.

"Davao..." said Yamamoto. "Yes, I suppose it would be too much to think such a test could be conducted without the Army knowing about it. Well gentlemen, the Navy has operations, plans, ships, equipment that the Army may not yet measure. I said we will deal with this *Mizuchi*, and we will. But let me impress upon you both that operational secrecy is most important. As far as both of you should be concerned, nothing whatsoever happened at Davao. Understand?"

He said that with the full weight of his considerable reputation and rank, and both Imamura and Hyakutake understood the warning he was giving them. Yamamoto waited briefly, then continued. “So we will be sending more than three cruisers north to join our naval forces already in theater there—but let us not speak further of this.”

After a sufficient pause, Ugaki continued to press for additional Army support for Operation FS. “Considering that we are now fully committed to resolving matters in the north, can the Army provide us with any further troops in the South?”

Imamura’s eyes narrowed. He had been on a most unusual ship, he now realized, rescued by it at sea. Yet the more he thought about that time, the more suspicious he became. The Captain and crew were dressed strangely, as though they were some secret new branch of the Navy. He realized now that they were making great efforts to keep him confined in the sick bay, and that their maneuver to deliver him to the meeting with Yamamoto was not entirely on the up and up. A few discrete inquiries revealed the truth of that to him. There had been no order by the Army Chiefs that he come to meet Yamamoto at Davao. That had all been quietly arranged by the Navy. And when he saw that most interesting demonstration in the bay off Davao...

Now his quick mind began to realize that something most unusual was afoot here. The Navy had a new ship—a secret ship. His inquiries had also revealed that it was not even on the register of active vessels, and so he assumed it must be a top secret command unit, or weapons development project.

So, the Navy is really worried about this new Siberian ship, he thought quickly. In fact, they are indeed going to send more than three cruisers north to deal with it. How I would love to be on that strange ship that rescued me when it does sail north to battle, for clearly this is what Admiral Yamamoto was suggesting. And he looked directly at me, the senior Army officer here, as he said that. So I think I must oblige him in exchange.

“Considering the gravity of these operations,” he said to Yamamoto directly, “I think we can come to some agreement here. General Nishimura is still sitting on Singapore under all that ashfall with the Army he inherited from General Yamashita. He has both the 18th Division and his Imperial Guards Division on the main island now, and that is more than enough to manage that situation. Therefore.... It would seem that the 5th Division,

whatever remains of it, would be available.” He smiled.

Yamamoto returned the smile, and with an ever so subtle nod of his head. “Yes,” he said quietly, reaching for his white dress gloves. “I think we can come to an agreement.”

Chapter 23

That same evening Yamamoto summoned the senior officers from *Takami* to confer with them on the situation and issue new orders. Harada and Fukada met him in that same stateroom aboard *Yamato*, and were soon surprised to learn what he had in mind.

“We are now facing two enemy operations,” he began, “one in the north, and a second aimed at reinforcing Fiji in the south. We have spoken with the Army to see about obtaining additional forces for Operation FS, and an agreement was reached. The Tanaka Regiment of the 48th Division is boarding transports as we speak and it is my intention to depart Rabaul and lead the *Kido Butai* south again immediately.”

“Very well,” said Harada. “*Takami* is ready to accompany you.”

“That will not be necessary. In fact, I have new orders for you. The situation in the north has changed. Last night the Siberians staged another surprise landing in the far north of Kira Karafuto province. It was not a substantial landing, but we believe they delivered a reinforced regiment there, and have every intention of pushing south to increase their lodgment. The Army has sufficient forces on the island to respond, but it will soon become necessary to send additional forces from Hokkaido. Your mission will be to assure that these troops arrive safely.”

“I see,” said Harada. “Where will they come from?”

“Sapporo—elements of our 7th Division, which now garrisons Hokkaido. We could move them by land to Wakkanai in the North Cape area, but that is a fairly small port. The facilities at Sapporo are better suited to receive the shipping required, and boarding transports there was deemed a safer option by the Army.”

“A safer option?” Fukada heard more in that. “Then you expect that any cross channel operation from Wakkanai in the Soya Strait would be opposed?”

“That possibility was suggested, though it is only a hundred miles or so from that port to Rutaka or Otomari on Karafuto. It is more than twice that distance from Sapporo, but all in waters we have controlled for decades. The threat, however, may be real, and you have already told me of this Siberian

ship you believe is from the same time you claim to come from. While I still find all of this too fantastic to contemplate, I have accepted the reality of your presence here, and already seen the damage that can be inflicted by these new rocket weapons you possess. Therefore, I want you to provide fleet area defense for the main reinforcement operation for Karafuto.”

“You believe this Russian ship will attempt to intervene?”

“That will have to remain a strong possibility. The enemy knows what he is about, and also knows the countermeasures we must take if we are to foil him. He knows we must move troops by sea, and it is therefore logical to expect he will take this into consideration. You have told me the man who now leads the Free Siberian State is not a man of our time, and that his ship is the most powerful vessel in the world. Our own sailors now speak of it in hushed whispers. They call it *Mizuchi*, a sea demon from the old lore. This ship must be opposed, and if your vessel is capable of the task, then that is now your assignment. You will sail tonight with three heavy cruisers led by our most able Admiral Kurita. I have briefed him on this mission, and appointed him overall commander of the Northern Fleet that will now be assembled for this operation. Any questions?”

Harada noted that Yamamoto never asked them whether they wished to take on this assignment, or even if *Takami* was indeed capable of performing the task he had in mind. Those were questions that were still playing in the Captain’s own mind, but Fukada spoke first.

“Then you will go south to face the Americans alone? Shouldn’t we make certain they are defeated in the south before we turn to the north?”

Yamamoto smiled, dismissing the effrontery of this young officer, for he already was well aware of his mind on this war. Few officers would have dared to question what was such an obvious order, and without so much as a ‘with all due respect, sir.’ This man is headstrong, he thought, but he is also a fighter.

“It will not be possible to throw a stone in two directions at once,” he said quietly. “So I take the *Kido Butai* in my hand now to face the Americans as I might have in the history books in your ship’s library. Only this time we will not fight over a meaningless speck in the center of the Pacific like Midway. This time we will fight to secure and preserve our landing on Fiji, and to continue with Operation FS as it was envisioned. As soon as we withdrew to replenish, the American fleet moved in and gave our troops down there a

good pounding. The small air squadron we posted at Nandi was simply not capable of opposing their naval air power. Only the *Kido Butai* can do that. Now I will go and see if they still wish to do battle at sea. *Zuikaku* has completed minor repairs, and it will join *Akagi* and *Soryu*, along with the light carriers *Zuiho* and *Shoho*. I have asked the Army for additional troops, and they were forthcoming. They have, in turn, asked me for something.”

“Naval support in the north,” said Harada.

“Correct. You cautioned me earlier concerning the capabilities of this Siberian ship. Now you will see to the matter, though you will not sail alone. The carrier *Tosa* is on permanent station in the north, and it is moving to Yokohama tonight. *Kaga* has also completed its refit, and those two ships will be designated Carrier Division 2. Admiral Kurita will add a cruiser division to that force, which will also include two of our newest fast battleships, and additional destroyers in support. I want your ship to sail with the covering force, protect it, defend the troop convoy, and ensure a safe landing on Karafuto. After that, further offensive operations will likely be necessary.”

This time it was Harada who heard more in that than there seemed at first blush. “Additional offensive operations?”

“The enemy is operating from Magadan in the far north. The currents there leave an ice free channel leading to that port. It must be neutralized to stem the flow of supplies and troops to the forces they have landed on Kira Karafuto. Beyond that, there is the matter of lower Kanzantochi. An operation will eventually be planned to retake the port that was lost earlier this year. For the moment, the reinforcement of Karafuto will suffice—and the matter of this Siberian ship.”

Now the Admiral was quiet for a moment looking the men over, taking their measure. “Do you have any reservations concerning these orders?”

Harada shook his head. “No sir. The Russians were no friend to Japan, even in 2021. In fact, our Navy routinely drilled to oppose them in the Sea of Japan. We were at war with them when our ship was recalled north to home waters. Unfortunately, we did not make it home, but here we are, and here we also find a Russian ship from our time making war on Japan. So I can say, without reservation, that my ship and crew will do everything possible to neutralize this ship.”

“That is good to hear, but now I have one last question. Can you stop this

ship?” That was the real point of this discussion, finally asked directly, and Harada noted there was just the hint of uncertainty in Yamamoto’s voice.

“Mister Fukada?” The Captain was going to let his XO speak to their chances.

“Sir, our missiles are fully capable of intercepting and shooting down the weapons this ship can employ. That said, our ship is configured more for fleet defense than it is for offense. We have only eight missiles that were designed for use as anti-ship weapons. The rest were largely designed to defeat enemy aircraft and incoming missiles. To answer you directly—yes, I believe we can successfully defend the fleet, though our chances of inflicting real harm on the enemy are not as good.”

“Explain,” said Yamamoto, arms folded, and very curious as to how two ships with these new weapons might fight one another.

“Sir, in our day the element of first contact is very important, even as it is now. In this, we may have a slight edge on the enemy radars. They are good, but I believe our equipment is superior. Once detected, missile salvos are fired in a relatively large group to maximize the chances of obtaining a critical hit. Any hit, in fact, will do great harm to the enemy, or to our own ship should we fail to stop each and every incoming missile.”

“Interesting,” said Yamamoto. “Then you cannot sustain hits and still continue fighting, as this ship might easily do?”

“That will depend on what we were hit with, but these missiles are very deadly. I believe you already know that from the damage inflicted on *Hiryu*. Our ship would fare no better if struck by a missile.”

“I see... Thus in many ways, *Takami* might be thought of as an aircraft carrier, but one with a very small squadron of offensive strike planes, and a large number of fighters. Am I correct?”

“The analogy is good,” said Fukada.

“Yet you will have the element of surprise this time.”

“Possibly,” said Fukada, hedging his bet. “The enemy will not expect our presence here, but they still have the capability of detecting our electronics. Their ship has the ability to detect and analyze electronic emissions, and even relate them to existing ship types that might utilize such equipment.”

“So you are saying they might hear your ship, if that analogy is correct, and then determine who and what you are by simply listening?”

“Correct sir, but they will first have to believe what their ears are telling

them. In that interval, between their interception of a signal, and their conclusion about it, lies our chance for surprise.”

“And the enemy ship... They have more missiles than *Takami*?”

“If this is a standard loadout for a *Kirov* Class battlecruiser, then they will have at least 20 SSMs—a designation we give to ship killing missiles. Some of these have already been used to strike our ships, but let us assume they will have at least 16 remaining.”

“Twice as many as your ship.”

“Correct sir, and it might be fair to say that the Russian missiles are quite good—perhaps better than our own SSM design. Yet we will have at least 70 fighters to stop those 16 strike planes, to continue with your analogy. I believe our chances are very good.”

“And can they stop your missiles?”

Fukada took a deep breath. “Sir, their chances are also very good in that.”

“I understand,” said Yamamoto. “Of course, the God of Chance must always have his say. Things in war seldom go as we might expect.”

“There is one other consideration sir,” said Fukada. “If we do lock horns with this *Mizuchi*, then it may be necessary to expend a considerable portion of our missile inventory to do battle effectively.”

“Of course.”

“Well sir, please realize that we cannot replenish or replace any weapon we use. Once these planes are launched, these missiles fired, they go to their sure and certain death, much like our *Kamikaze* pilots.”

“*Kamikaze*? Ah, yes, I read of this in your ship’s library. I suppose that is a very good analogy.”

“I mention this because the aid we can provide is therefore limited. We could surprise and put serious damage on these last remaining American carriers. Or we might successfully protect this operation planned for the north, but as you have said, we cannot throw a stone in two directions.”

Yamamoto nodded. This man wants to go south, he realized. He would prefer the clear superiority his ship has against forces from this time. He believes the surprise and shock his ship could deliver to the Americans might be decisive... But I prefer to handle that myself. The Americans I can face on equal terms, and then, may the better man win. This *Mizuchi*... it is a demon from hell, and I would only waste my forces in trying to find and oppose it. That is a task their ship was designed for, and so that is what they will do. He

did not waste any further breath explaining this to Fukada, but simply repeated his orders, an air of finality evident in his tone.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “You sail tonight. Join Admiral Kurita’s Cruiser Squadron. Protect the fleet. Stop this Russian ship... And may the Thunder Gods go with you.”

“Very good sir,” said Harada. “We will do our best.”

The only question in the Captain’s mind was whether their best would be good enough. He could see what Yamamoto was doing here, his mind grasping the same logic that the Admiral had run down in his own thinking. *Takami* was born and bred to do what Yamamoto was now ordering, in this era or in their own time.

He had listened to Fukada’s explanations, and was satisfied with them. The best we might hope for up north is a stalemate, he thought. But even that would be good enough to complete the mission the Admiral is handing us. We signed on to protect and defend Japan? Well, I’ll admit I had reservations before when it came to cutting down the Americans from this era. It just seemed so underhanded, though this Karpov certainly had no qualms about turning his missiles on our ships.

Perhaps I can use that—the other fellow’s hubris could be something I can take advantage of. We will have that single edge in this thing—the element of surprise. Yet they have a lot of muscle on that battlecruiser, and a man at the helm that had no reservations of his own when he faced down the US 7th Fleet... My God, that was just a few weeks ago, but now it won’t happen for eighty years—if it ever happens at all. Everything we do here is shuffling the card deck. Our own future history may not look anything like the time we lived in. Thinking about that is somewhat frightening. Have they considered any of this? If they have, it hasn’t stayed their missile fire orders. I’m going to have to be just as tough in this situation.

The Captain was thinking he had a fairly good chance in the fight up north. Yet neither he, nor his executive officer, had any idea that *Kirov* had departed Severomorsk with her magazines burgeoning with reloads. The ship had intended to use live ordnance for those exercises in the Norwegian Sea, and then still have a full bar after the party was over. But they had never fired those rounds off, and so Fukada’s math was just a little off that day.

Kirov had better than a two-to-one advantage in SSMs. In fact, instead of 16 SSMs as Fukada had explained, the ship was carrying 37 of the dread

Moskit IIs, with 20 of those crated in a deep interior magazine. It also had seven more P-900s and another ten MOS-IIIs. *Kirov* would therefore enjoy a six-to-one advantage in ship killing missiles, but Fukada did not know that. To make matters worse, the ship possessed another 20 torpedoes, twice as many as *Takami* had. On defense, the Russian ship still had 61 of the superb S-300 long range SAMs, 127 of the Klinok Gauntlet type missiles, and 64 of the short range Kashtan system missiles, a three-to-one advantage in SAMs. *Kirov* was, without any doubt, the undisputed champion of the world when it came to a surface action ship. Fukada had said nothing of another weapon deep within the maw of *Mizuchi*, a breath of fire and destruction that had not yet been seen in this half of the world. *Kirov* had nukes...

Yet as Yamamoto had warned, the Gods of Chance must have their say, and there were also weapons and systems aboard *Takami* that the Russians were not aware of—and the fact that they would never expect that ship to be present in 1942 would also go a long way towards balancing the odds.

That night, *Takami* departed Rabaul as ordered, cruising with Admiral Kurita, who was now deemed their nominal superior officer. They had joined the Japanese navy to protect and defend Japan, and that was what they were now setting off to do.

Chapter 24

Eager to get in to the action after joining the Halsey Group, the *Wasp* went south immediately, joining in on the strikes made against the Japanese lodgment. On the 28th of April it was detached to rendezvous with a tanker and refuel, temporarily reducing TF-16 to only two fleet carriers. After having pounded the facilities lost to the Japanese at Nandi, the powerful US battlegroup also withdrew east to Pago Pago, more to replenish ammunition than fuel. Halsey kept station north of Viti Levu, but coastwatchers and PBY sightings soon confirmed that the Japanese carriers were again heading south.

“Thanks for taking the basket ride over here to see me,” he said to Captain Marc “Pete” Mitscher from the *Hornet*, conferring with him aboard the *Enterprise*. Mitscher was a tall, lean man, with a well weathered face and a career dating back to 1910 in the Navy. Halsey wanted to run a few things by him, and share some intelligence.

“Pete, this will be the big one. We either toe the line here or they’ll push us all the way back to Samoa. The only question I have is whether we should cut Reeves and the *Wasp* loose to operate independently, or keep all our carriers together in one group.”

“Easier to coordinate our strikes from one group,” said Mitscher. “Also more planes available for CAP.”

“True, but they’ll find us out here one way or another, and we can expect to be hit. So it’s a question of how many carriers they find at one time. If I team *Shiloh* with the *Wasp*, they would have to split any strike to get at all our flattops.”

“You’re assuming they’ll operate in one group?”

“That’s been their MO in the past. They call it the *Kido Butai*, and word is that that big battlewagon they have is running with the carriers—the *Yamato*. All six carriers were together when they hit Pearl, though they broke the four they had into two groups in the Coral Sea when they hit Fletcher.”

“All it took was one group to put *Sara* and *Yorktown* down,” said Mitscher.

“I’ll give them that,” said Halsey. “They know what they’re doing when it comes to carrier operations. But our boys are gaining experience and

confidence day by day. The Doolittle Raid we pulled off did a world of good for morale, not only here but back home as well. Now I want to deliver a good punch to this *Kido Butai* if it shows up, and then dance the late rounds if they still have any fight in them. But we may do things a little differently here. This is going to be combat in fairly restricted waters. There are a couple hundred island scattered through this area, and coral reefs everywhere.”

“Alright, you want to split the group, I’ll support that. But *Shiloh* carries only 24 planes. We might at least think about operating within close supporting distance of each other. That way if one or another group gets targeted, the other might lend a hand.”

“That’ll be the order,” said Halsey. “I’ll detach *Shiloh* at 12:00 and have her link up with *Wasp*. A pair of cruisers and five destroyers should be enough to flesh that group out. We’ll designate it TF-17.”

“That was Fletcher’s old handle before he merged it into TF-11,” said Mitscher. “The men get spooky about things like that.”

“Alright then, make it Taffy 18. I like the even numbers anyway.”

“How you figure to hit them?” asked Mitscher. He knew they called Halsey “Bull” for more than one reason, but chief among them was his propensity to be aggressive as a commander, so what he heard next came as a surprise.

“I’ve had a lot of traffic from Nimitz at Pearl,” said Halsey. “He wants me to play a different game down here. Yes, I’d go right at them if we still had Fletcher’s group out there. But the loss of those two carriers is starting to sting. I’m sitting here with the only maneuverable strike element we have in the US Navy now, and we just flat out can’t risk losing it. We’re getting the *Essex* sooner than we expected, but it still won’t be available until September, so it’s occurred to me that we have another carrier at hand that can serve us equally well in this fight—The USS *Suva*. Nimitz suggested it, and the more I think it over, the more I tend to agree. So I’m going to transfer in fighters and strike aircraft from the carriers to that base. I’ll want one strike squadron from each of the fleet carriers—your choice when the hat gets passed to the *Hornet*. Then we’re going to sit up here on the other side of Vanua Levu, so we can have men down there reporting anything they see coming our way. Our mission is to preserve and defend that airfield at Suva, feed in planes, and hammer their own field at Nandi, and any troop or supply convoys they try to bring in.”

“What if the Japs swing around the main islands looking for a fight?”

“Then we swing too, but in the other direction. Now you know me, Pete. You’re a fighting fool just like I am, and you know I wouldn’t run from the devil himself. But the idea here is that we keep the island between us and them, which means they have to overfly anything we have at Suva to get at our carriers. They’ve got an Army Pursuit squadron there with Air Cobras. If we can put enough Wildcats in to back them up, those fighters could break up Jap strike formations aimed at us—but the inverse won’t be true when we go after them with our strike planes.”

Mitscher nodded. “Sounds damn interesting. I like it. In fact, what we need now are a couple good battalions of Seabees and more airfields all over this island group.”

“Damn right, and the planes and pilots to put those airfields to good use. Nimitz says he’s looking to scrape up anyone he can find with experience. Some of the flyers are mustering out of China, and he’s asked for them.”

“The Flying Tigers?”

“The very same—only this time they won’t have to paint those big white teeth on an Army P-40. The Navy is getting a new fighter, the F4U Corsair.”

“I’ve heard they wouldn’t be ready for months. Hell, I’ve been asking for them since Pearl.”

“Sorry Pete, you got passed over. We all did. They only had one squadron available, so they sent it out to Pearl last week. We were at sea, so it ended up on the *Shiloh*—nine planes. More will be coming soon, but the next bunch goes to the Marines.”

“The Marines? What the hell?”

“That’s where these Tiger pilots moved, right into the USMC. So they’ll have a squadron ready with these new fighters inside a week, but it won’t be enough.”

“Well, we can ferry in planes and set up a de-facto task force of unsinkable aircraft carriers out here on these islands. Sure they can hit those airfields, but if we shadow box them like I think you have it figured, then we can hold our own. It’s a hell of a lot easier to bulldoze over runway craters than it is to build one of these aircraft carriers.”

“That’s the way Nimitz put it, and that’s the way we’ll play it.”

“Intel thinks they sortied with some heavy ships again.”

“More than likely,” said Halsey. “But we’ve got that fast battleship

squadron down here now, and I'll damn well put it to good use. This is becoming a bit of a chess game, and that base at Suva is a good solid pawn, right in the middle of the board. We're the Knights and Bishops, and we protect that pawn, hold the center, and win through in the endgame with those Marines. Patch and Vandegrift have their marching orders. While we play it cagey out here, the Army and Marines won't be sitting on defense any longer. They're going to attack."

* * *

Halsey's first order of business was to get down and hammer the Jap airfield at Nandi. He did exactly what he planned, advancing in two task forces to hover north of Vanua Levu. What he wanted was a real one two punch, with his SBDs going in first to sweep the Japanese controlled fields with a series of good crisp jabs, then the big right hand haymaker, with the Battle Fleet composed of *North Carolina*, *Washington* and *South Dakota*. The Black Shoe Admiral that had seen his carriers shot out from under him in the Coral Sea was back. Fletcher had transferred to the cruiser *Portland*, and brought that ship back towards Fiji with the *Pensacola* and *Astoria*. The five destroyers he had were also in tow.

With most of his experience running surface ships, Fletcher felt he was finally playing in the correct league. He had been shaken by the sudden defeat that killed the *Saratoga* and *Yorktown*, but there would be no time to brood over the loss. Halsey gave him the battleship squadron, and ordered him in to get some payback by hitting the Japanese at Nandi.

There were only two squadrons of enemy planes reported there, both flown in from Noumea where they had been transferred off the light carrier *Hiyo* some months earlier. There were 12 D3A Dive bombers for a small strike element, and 12 more A5M Fighters. When Halsey's planes hit the new airfield near Tavua in the north, those "Claudes" as the Americans called them all scrambled to defend the main field at Nandi. One of the Vals out on patrol had spotted the approach of Fletcher's battleships, and radioed back to his squadron mates. They got into the air and on their way just ten minutes before the SBDs off the Halsey Group came thundering in to start their attack.

Battleships had long been the apple in the eye of a Japanese pilot, and

when those D3As saw them they were delighted, and even more enthused by the fact that there were no American fighters up over them. A formation of 10 planes came in to attack, but Fletcher had spotted them on radar, and his ships were rough and ready, his gunners soon filling the skies with flak as the enemy began their diving runs.

AA Cruiser *San Juan* was in escort, an *Atlanta* Class light cruiser with 16 Dual Purpose 5-inch guns that could elevate 85 degrees with added mounts for rounds with special AA fuses. It would come to be considered the very best dual purpose gun in its class, if not the world, and those big rounds were quick to darken the sky over the task force. In spite of that, it was often necessary to fire off at least 100 rounds to get a kill, but good crews could get off over 20 rounds per minute with those guns, so the next five minutes were going to be hot. *San Juan* would get two of those Vals with that flurry of AAC Mark 49 flak shells that afternoon. Two more would fall prey to her Bofors 40mm guns, 14 in all, and she also had 13 more 20mm Oerlikon AA guns.

Both the *Washington* and *North Carolina* had 20 of the same 5-inch guns that made up *San Juan*'s primary battery, and another 16 of the 1.1-inch AA guns. *South Dakota*, being one step newer, had 16 of the 5-inchers, but was beefed up considerably when it came to air defense, as that ship had been built with the idea of it being a Fleet Flagship. It was given no less than 68 Bofors 40mm guns, and 76 of the 20mm Oerlikon AA guns. Her 5-inch guns also carried a very special new round designed for air defense. That was the ship that put those Vals down for the count, getting four more as they came in, with another taken down by the *North Carolina*. But that left two that got through, and their aim was true. One of the dying planes had also got its bomb off before being hit, so the Japanese got just a little reprisal for the loss of that squadron. They put two one bomb on the *North Carolina*, and two more on the *San Juan*.

Fletcher winced when he saw the explosion hit his lead battleship. He had already darkened his reputation by losing two fleet carriers, and now the thought that he might lose a battleship here rankled in the back of his mind. But that was not to be. *North Carolina* was a very well protected ship, with armor accounting for 41% of her total displacement, over 45,000 tons full load. Her armored decks were in three layers that totaled just over seven inches of steel. Her conning tower had 14 to 16 inches of armor, and so the

“Showboat,” as the ship was called, brushed off the hit to her forward deck easily enough.

San Juan did not fare quite so well. One bomb hit her amidships, just aft of the rear funnel on her starboard side, setting off a torpedo mount. That put the twin 5-inch battery there out of action, and blew a good sized hole in the deck, scoring the funnel with a lot of shrapnel. While not in danger of sinking, the fires looked serious, giving the sole Japanese pilot to get out of that attack alive something to crow about. He reported he had set a battleship on fire, and no one would ever be the wiser. Fletcher decided to detach the ship and send it back to Pago Pago, but he was more than determined to carry on his mission and get after that airfield.

The sun set an hour later, with no further sign of enemy planes, and that night the three battleships would deliver a most unwelcome surprise to the Japanese at Nandi. Fletcher’s five destroyers had swept on ahead to make the introductions. They began dueling with a few Japanese shore batteries, though not many guns could be spared for that role. The Japanese thought they had little to fear when the destroyers lighter rounds came in. They caused more noise and distraction than damage, but ten minutes later the gloaming horizon darkened with the silhouettes of those three US battleships, and in came the big 16-inch rounds, and with terrible effect.

Four of the twelve Claudes were blasted on the airstrip, which saw no less than 19 shells coming to plant big craters there. The port dock and warehouse area took five direct hits, and a fuel tank took another, exploding in a blaze of fire and smoke. As Fletcher watched the smoke and fire hit the enemy for a change, he managed just the hint of a smile. Fedorov’s history recorded him as a cautious but competent carrier commander, with more than one victory to notch his belt. Yet he was a surface action commander at heart, and that was where he would take his ride into the pages of this history.

Far to the west, the Close Covering force waiting for the Tanaka Detachment convoy got new orders that night. Captain Mori on the heavy cruiser *Haguro* was ordered to take his ships in to sweep the harbor area. He had the cruiser *Maya* with him, and five destroyers, and was thinking to steal in and catch the Americans near Nandi by surprise the following morning. It was a rash order, sent by the local commander at Noumea in response to an urgent radio call from Nandi asking for naval support, and not by Yamamoto’s Combined Fleet HQ. Those three battleships would be more

than a match for the Japanese, but Mori's group would never get there.

Halsey's planes would find them first.

Out to finish up the Japanese airfields, a mixed formation of 27 SBDs escorted by 18 Wildcats spotted the enemy ships just after sunrise on the 28th of April. They came screaming in to get their vengeance for the attack that had sent the *San Juan* to the corner. Both *Haguro* and *Maya* would take three hits, with serious damage and heavy fires on both cruisers. The destroyer *Ushio* also took a bomb forward, which was enough to put that ship out of the game. The entire force did a hasty 180 degree turn and withdrew to Noumea, chastened and well warned.

The opening act of the naval battle for the Fiji Group had gone to Bull Halsey. The airfields at Nandi and Tavua were in very bad shape, and the Japanese had lost the services of those two heavy cruisers, and all but seven A5M fighters, and three Vals that still remained at Nandi. When Yamamoto got the news he was not pleased.

"So, the American carriers have spoiled our celebration of Showa Day, the Emperor's Birthday. Who ordered that covering force to move to the Fijis so soon, and without proper air cover?"

"I assure you, Admiral, the order did not come from this headquarters."

"Well, find out where it did come from, and tell the man who issued it that I will speak with him directly after this is over. In the meantime, as the landings in the Santa Cruz Islands look to be unopposed, we will now depart to join Admiral Hara. We move south this morning."

Part IX

The 5th of May

“Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

Chapter 25

It would be no easy matter to take a big unit like the 1st USMC Division and get it off the transports, unpacked, sorted out and ready for combat, but there was very little time to get that done. PBYS out of Suva had spotted the approach of the Japanese carriers, and all those troops and supplies had to be unloaded before they got there. The transports had orders to immediately put to sea as they were emptied, and return to Pago Pago, and the docks and quays at Suva were a beehive of activity.

One thing that sped the process along was the fact that all regiments arrived 'tactically loaded,' with the proper heavy equipment packed on the transport with the correct combat troops. That said, 1st Marine Div was heavy, with four regiments and a fifth still en route. It took Vandegrift several days get to get his regiments grouped properly and ready to move.

"Where have you been?" said an Army Corporal. "We've been out here facing down Tojo for over a month!"

"Yeah?" said a sour faced Marine. "We've been puking our guts out on those goddamned transports, all the way from Pearl. But that's no matter. Move aside, greenback, the USMC is here."

Vandegrift was watching from a high perch on the weather deck of *President Jackson*, where he had been looking over the operation. Yes, the Marines were here, and he was leading them in. Now it was time to meet with General Patch of the Pacifica Division. Later that day, the two men met ashore.

"My division is now strung out all along the southern coast of the island," said Patch. "Except for the regiment I sent you to help unload those ships. The Kiwis put up a tough fight, and they're presently screening the main road out west at Nayawa." He pressed a weathered brown finger on the map to indicate the position. "That's the mouth of the Singatana River. The only road inland into the high country follows that river north from Nayawa. Now I'm backstopping that position with the 132nd Regiment. The other two are positioned all along Queens Road on the southern coast. There are only a few decent landing points there, but they have to be held. We've already invested time to get some additional airfields located there, one at Korolevu about 20

klicks east of Nawaya, and a second at Deuba, about 35 klicks further east. They've been hitting the main field north of Suva, so we think this will help."

"Unless the Japs shell the hell out of those fields from the sea. They're right on the coast."

"Couldn't be helped," said Patch. "The jungle comes right down to the water's edge in places, and terrain can rise steeply from the coast. That area is the only place with clearings suitable for an airfield. Besides, the Navy is here, aren't they? They gave you folks a ride in."

"Let's just hope they stick around," said Vandegrift. "Alright, where do you want my men?"

"North of Suva," Patch pointed again. "See these two roads? One swings out near the airfield at Nasouri, and then follows the Rewa River up through Kasavo. The one on the left here moves through the lowland and then hits some fairly thick jungle. It becomes little more than a trail at that point, but you can still move vehicles on it. It'll run along a tributary of the Rewa River until it reaches the village of Vunindawa here, then it bends east and joins the other road. So you can move two regiments up that way, one on each road. Then establish your CP right there where they meet."

"Any idea what the Japs have up there?"

"Sakaguchi Detachment—about one regiment in strength. There's a battalion of Fiji Commandos watching that road as it continues along the river north from the junction. Your first order of business will be to get up there and make contact with that unit."

"Fiji Commandos?"

"Yup, recruited by the Kiwis from the locals here on the island. From what I hear they're one tough outfit. They know the jungle, and the island itself, like the back of their hand. They can be your eyes and ears up there. I've also put together a wild bunch of my own, and I had them training with this Fiji group. We call them the Alamo Raiders. They can help you out on point as pathfinders. What I want you to do—what Big Mac wants us to do, is to take your division up north and recapture Tavua. That'll put you in a position to push for Nandi from the northeast. When you're ready, I'll bunch up my division here on the southern coast and we'll push from this end."

"What about the high country in the center of the island?"

"It's tough going up there, but that doesn't mean the Japs won't use it. The thing is this—if we make a big push for Nandi like this, they'll simply

have to fall back to defend it. If they lose that, it's over for them here, and they damn well know it."

It seemed as good a plan as any that could be devised, so Vandegrift got started that day, ordering his 1st and 5th Marine Regiments to move out on those roads. The heavy equipment was still being unloaded, but he could at least get his rifle companies moving, and they had mortars and M1 machineguns. A few 75mm guns had come on the transports, but the bigger 155mm guns and the sound and flash ranging equipment used in counterbattery fire had been in another convoy, and would not arrive for several days.

Yet the fact that a functioning port had been ready to receive them saw the division land with a good deal more supply than it ever had in Fedorov's history on Guadalcanal. It was an easy landing, and the division found itself fairly well equipped. Soon they were on those roads, with the 7th Regiment on the left, and the 5th on the right.

While this was going on, two battalions of the Sakaguchi Detachment were already moving south. They had swept through the northeast segment of the island, finding it unoccupied, and now thought to swoop down on Suva from the north. The first battalion found the road, and ran right into 1/5 Marines just as it was about to emerge from the heavier jungle into a highland meadow. There followed a very sharp engagement, with the Japanese thinking they would simply storm the enemy unit as they had all others.

The Marines deployed from march, rushing in platoon sized groups to fan out on either side of the road at the edge of the jungle. The BAR teams were already putting out suppressive fire, and they kept the Japanese heads down until the M1 teams could get their machineguns set up. Following their usual tactics, the 2nd Battalion of Sakaguchi's troops immediately moved to their left, intending to flank the Marine position astride the road. Unfortunately, they were going to run directly into the jungle savvy commandos of the Fiji Battalion, which had been placed there to protect and screen that flank and road.

The commandos were very wood crafty, and knew how to lay low in unseen positions in the thickets of the jungle. They waited for the Japanese patrols to begin slipping through their lines, then, animated by a strange bird call made by their CO, they leapt up like ghouls and began taking the three

and five man groups of Japanese infantry by surprise. It was knife work for a while, before the first shots of alarm rang out, then the chatter of a machine gun.

The Japanese finally realized what was happening, and organized for a strong infantry attack at near battalion strength. This was able to drive the commandos back, but they simply melted into the jungle, evaporating like mist in the heavy treeland. When the Japanese began to organize an advance the action started again, with small groups of commandos striking an unwary platoon, then melting away.

Off to the west, Sakaguchi's 1st battalion finally pushed back the Marines, the veteran infantry advancing fearlessly, until one Marine corporal, stopped, picked up a machinegun and just refused to give any more ground. That bought just enough time for the battalion to pull itself together, and soon the position was further bolstered by yet another full battalion of leathernecks deploying from road column.. The enemy attack was stopped like a tide breaking on the shore. This time the defenders held the line, and soon it was Colonel Leroy Hunt who was prepping his men for a counterattack. Hunt put in his whole regiment, and on his left, the 7th Marine Regiment was coming up the interior road and meeting a stubborn defense from the 4th Yokosuka SNLF battalion.

The Japanese were as tenacious on defense as they were in attack, and it took a good deal of firepower to force those men to retreat. Some simply refused, dying to a man in their positions and forcing the Marines to take down every last machinegun that had been set up on defense. When Vandegrift moved his division headquarters up country to get a better feel for what was happening, he looked over the captured position and made an astute observation that every officer on his staff never forgot.

"Looks like the enemy was trained to go to a place, stay there, fight and die. We train our men to go to a place, fight to win, and to live. I can assure you, it is a much better theory."

That was what the men of the Sakaguchi Regiment would have to do if they were going to hold in the north, fight and die. When reports reached Tavua that his men had encountered strong enemy resistance, he realized that he had very little in reserve. There was a single engineer battalion, with two of its three companies watching the northeast coast and the third on the airfield near Tavua trying to get it ready to receive friendly aircraft. The 2nd

Yokosuka SNLF had been ordered to reconnoiter the highland, and now it was necessary to recall it and have it march quickly to Tavua to stand as a reserve.

Something had just happened there on the main island of Viti Levu that no one fully realized that day. There, at the edge of that jungle in the Fiji highlands, the men of the Sakaguchi Regiment had been met, held, then pushed back by the sheer muscle and firepower of two full Marine Regiments. A third regiment, the 1st Marine under Colonel Cates, was now also coming up in support. It was May 1st, May Day, the day the restless coursing lines of war flowed up and receded at the edge of that jungle, yet no man on either side really appreciated how significant that was. The tide, at least on the ground, had turned.

* * *

Out on the Solomon Sea, the Japanese were slowly approaching, returning to challenge the naval and air superiority Halsey had imposed over the Fijis for the last week. No news had come from Fiji of late. The only news that would be sent home on Showa Day would be that of Japan's latest acquisition. He had shepherded the Shoji Detachment down from Buka and instead of landing on Guadalcanal as first planned, they had taken it to Espiritu Santo in the Santa Cruz Islands. As there was no other enemy activity in the lower Solomons, airfield construction Regiments would be dispatched immediately from Rabaul to both Lunga on Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo. That would complete the missing link in the long chain of islands stretching from Rabaul to Noumea. It was a masterful stroke, and even if the Fiji operation were to fail, the occupation of those islands, linking the Solomons to the New Hebrides, was of great strategic significance.

Thus far the US had enjoyed naval superiority in the Fiji Group after the initial landing, but the Japanese carriers were returning, intending to reach the scene by the first of May. As the American carriers had been spotted operating north of those islands, it was Yamamoto's intention to confront them directly. On the last day of April he was in position to sweep east, hoping to find and punish the last of the enemy carriers... But Halsey was not there.

True to his plan to try and keep the main Fiji islands between his carriers and the enemy, Halsey swung south. If Suva Bay were the center of a clock,

The Japanese were at 12:00 and the Americans at 06:00 at dawn on the first of May. A lone Kate off the *Akagi* saw what he thought were carriers and cruisers to the south of Kandavu Island, which sat about 50 nautical miles below the main Fiji group. The wizened Admiral Chuichi Nagumo had arrived from Japan to take over carrier operations in Yamamoto's group, and the sighting was enough for him to order an immediate strike from *Akagi* and *Soryu*.

All the dive bombers had been prepping for a ground strike against Suva, mostly armed with fragmentation bombs. To stop that process and rearm the planes with armor piercing bombs would take at least 30 minutes, so Nagumo sent his torpedo bombers instead, a total of 34 B5Ns, many armed with bombs and a few others with torpedoes. They were escorted by 22 Zeroes, but the strike ran into a very thick CAP defense, with all of 40 Wildcats up on defense, and they were enough to hold the enemy at bay. Many of the planes were forced to break formation and turn back. A few Kates got down into their torpedo runs, mostly focusing their attack on the *Enterprise* as Halsey watched from the weather deck. He was impressed by the dogged approach made by the enemy, even with his own fighters right on their tails. The enemy got torpedoes in the water, but lost twelve planes and scored no hits.

Suspecting an enemy surface group was nearby, Halsey had detached two cruisers, the *Cleveland* and *Honolulu*, with destroyers *Ward* and *Phelps* to sweep the Kandavu Channel ahead of his carriers. They were also found in this strike, but Nagumo's only consolation for the loss of so many torpedo planes was a single hit on the *Cleveland* by a Kate that had been armed with bombs that day. The first enemy punches had been parried, and now it was time for the US carriers to throw some lead the other way.

The previous night, Combined Fleet had doubled down on the order that sent cruisers into that channel on Showa day. With the carriers at hand, Ugaki deemed the risk acceptable this time and ordered two small surface action groups to sweep those same waters south of the islands. The first was composed of heavy cruisers *Haguro* and *Myoko*, and the 15th Destroyer Division with *Kuroshio*, *Oyashio*, *Hayashio*, and *Natsushio*. It was entering the Kandavu channel between Viti Levu and the Kandavu island, the most direct passage to Suva and the big Allied airfield at Nausori at the southeast corner of the island. That was the objective for Captain Sakiyama on the *Haguro*, to take his cruisers in and put that airfield out of action by

bombardment. Yet like Captain Mori's ill fated sortie a few days earlier, he would never get there.

A patrol of two SBDs off the *Enterprise* spotted the enemy cruisers heading east into the channel, and Halsey immediately went after them. 36 Wildcats accompanied the initial strike, which was made by 44 SBDs and 14 TBDs, a heavy blow that encountered no more than 9 A5M Claudes off the airfield at Nandi. The nimble fighters had to dodge craters to get airborne, but they managed it, only to get into a hail storm of F4F Wildcats. Seven were shot down, and the strike wave blew right on through to hit those cruisers.

When they were done destroyer *Oyashio* had taken a direct hit, with heavy fires amidships, *Myoko* was struck once, a near miss that mostly hit the ship's belt armor, but the heavy cruiser *Haguro* got smashed. The Dauntless pilots put no less than six bombs on the cruiser, riddling it with concussion and fire. The coup de grace was a single torpedo hit that would end the ship's misery. *Haguro* had once been fated to be the last major Japanese warship attacked and sunk in the war, but not this time around.

Two hours later a second strike arrived overhead with 24 SBDs and 8 TBDs off the *Wasp*. They found only one cruiser remaining, put a bomb on *Myoko*, and sunk a pair of destroyers, *Hayashio* and *Natsushio*. It was only the weather that prevented Halsey from destroying this entire group, for heavy thunderstorms popped up in the late afternoon, and the planes were called home.

That afternoon, Hara's carriers and most of the Vals off the Nagumo group pounded Allied ground positions on the main island, but did little real harm. There were now 40 Aircobras ready at Suva, joined by over 36 Wildcats that had been flown in from Pago Pago, more than enough to put up a substantial air cover over that island. The battle for Fiji was now beginning in earnest, and Bull Halsey was determined to hold the line. He had taken one punch, and given the enemy a bloody nose in return, but the worst of this fight was yet to come.

Chapter 26

Displeased with these results Yamamoto summoned Nagumo, to Fleet HQ aboard *Yamato* to discuss the situation. Nagumo bowed deeply, an apologetic expression on his face, but Yamamoto did not summon him to berate him. Nothing was said of the loss of *Haguro*, for this time it was Ugaki who had ordered those ships in. Yet Nagumo knew that silence was weighty, and he could hear the displeasure when Yamamoto finally spoke.

“Given that your orders were to strike the enemy ground facilities,” he said. “I can see why your dive bombers were not ready for anti-ship operations. Now that the enemy carriers have been discovered south of the islands, we must make them our primary targets. They apparently sought to avoid a direct clash with us here, but we must engage them. It is most unfortunate that the use of our B5N Torpedo bombers to make a long range attack as level bombers leaves us very few for these more important naval operations.”

Silence. Nagumo nodded slowly, understanding that Yamamoto was now expressing his real concern in the matter. Before he could think what to say, the Fleet Admiral simply asked him another question. “Given this situation, how do you propose to operate?”

“I considered moving east and then south,” said Nagumo, “following the route the Americans must have taken and cutting their line of communications back to Samoa. Now, with our cruiser group retiring to Noumea, I think it best to move counterclockwise around these islands, and swing down toward Nandi.”

“Agreed,” said Yamamoto. “We must also not forget the transports carrying the Tanaka Regiment and headquarters and artillery for the 48th Division. A move in that direction would put us between the enemy carriers and those transports, allowing us to cover their approach.”

“Under the circumstances,” said Nagumo. “The transports should be held near Noumea with the fleet oilers until we settle affairs with these enemy carriers.”

“That would also be a wise precaution. Very well, Admiral, we move as you suggest tonight, and should be steaming off Nandi Bay in the pre-dawn

hours tomorrow. The enemy carriers are now our first priority. No further strikes against ground targets should be planned until they are dealt with.”

That was what the Admiral had summoned him here to convey, Nagumo knew, and the burn of shame was on his neck, in spite of the subtle and diplomatic way in which the Fleet Commander had conducted this meeting, allowing him to lay out his plans before making that last final remark, almost as if it were an afterthought. But he knew what Yamamoto was really saying—get it right this time, reserve the torpedo planes for the enemy carriers, and cease fruitless bombing runs against ground targets. He berated himself inwardly, while outwardly, his face remained set in stone.

Search operations from the carriers should have detected the enemy move south, he thought. The fleet needed to be ready for any contingency... But that airfield at Suva must be hit again before we leave, and very hard this time.

It occurred to Nagumo that he possessed just the tool necessary to accomplish this task. Two groups built around heavy cruisers had attempted to run the Kandavu Strait, and each time they had been intercepted by American carriers lying in wait. This time the attack would be well timed, and it would be conducted by the fast battlecruisers *Kongo* and *Kirishima*. A night raid would be necessary, minimizing the possibility of both discovery in the strait on approach, or any effective enemy reprisal by air. And come dawn, when the bombardment group was withdrawing, his carriers had to be ready to provide the necessary cover.

We cannot be here indefinitely, thought Nagumo. Each mission we fly finds empty chairs in the briefing room. As skilled and determined as we are, attrition in war is inevitable. It kills planes, and the pilots in them, and it sinks ships.

He looked at the charts compiled by staff officers. *Akagi* had no more than 51 planes ready for operations. There were 45 on *Soryu*, and another 53 on *Zuikaku*. The two light carriers mustered a combined total of 40 planes. So the *Kido Butai* now had a total of 189 planes available. At Pearl Harbor we had twice that number, he thought. We have not yet fully engaged the remaining American carriers. Yes, many of the men off *Shokaku* made it safely to Noumea. Several of those *Chutai* have been moved to the New Hebrides airfields, and they can transfer to the carriers as needed. Before we leave here, I must make certain the American carriers can no longer pose any

serious threat to our continued operations.

That was what Yamamoto seemed to press upon him—get the enemy’s mobile striking power. Their fixed base assets could come later, and perhaps the Army could solve that problem in the long run. Yet bringing the enemy to heel would prove more difficult than he thought. The Fiji Island group was a vast area, with the main island surrounded by hundreds of small islets and coral reefs everywhere. When Nagumo moved south to get into position to strike the last reported position of the enemy, his reconnaissance planes soon reported that the Americans had swung north again, cleverly placing the main islands between their position and the *Kido Butai*. The two sides seemed to be circling those islands like two Samurai warriors, swords ready and just waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

Two days passed with little more than sniping between long range CAP patrols on either side. Frustrated, Nagumo moved north again to the 12:00 position on the clock face, with the Americans last reported at 03:00. It was then that his enemy would do something most unexpected, and it would set the scene for all that would follow.

* * *

“God damnit!” Halsey was clearly not happy. “Here we just get into position to take these bastards on, and look at this!” He handed *Enterprise* Captain Murray the latest signal from Pearl. Nimitz had his spoon in the soup again.

Murray took the message, reading it aloud: “Given latest intelligence of enemy carriers moving east, imperative you cover underway operations embarking 112th Base Force from Pago Pago to Savuii Island in Samoa Group. Do not engage enemy carrier group and withdraw east at earliest opportunity.” He looked up at Halsey, who was still venting steam, arms crossed on his barrel chest, eyes dark with his displeasure.

“They’ll pound that airfield at Suva all day if we pull out now,” said Halsey. “Damnit, if Nimitz wanted to run this operation, then why didn’t he take the Con himself out here?” He fretted, scratching a reddish rash on his arm and elbow.

“You read The Fleet OP PLAN order from Admiral King,” said Murray. He could recite it almost verbatim now: “Inflict maximum damage on enemy

by employing strong attrition tactics. But do not accept such decisive action as would be likely to incur heavy losses in our carriers and cruisers.”

“Well we can’t beat them if we don’t fight them,” said Halsey. “Alright, I’m ordered to cover that silly transport operation, and so that’s what I’ll tell Fletcher to do.” Halsey had found his only way out of the corner.

“Fletcher?”

“He’s senior to Reeves on the *Wasp*, so I put him back in the saddle with Taffy-18. He can take *Wasp* and *Shiloh* east and screen that damn sealift operation, but by God, I’m going to keep my fighters in range of Suva, come hell or high water.”

“Well we might just end up getting both,” Captain Murray warned. “You’re going to split up the Task Group and then wait here for the whole enemy force to come at us? That last sighting report had them coming due east. It looks like they mean business.”

“Well I mean business too,” said Halsey with a scowl, “but we won’t stand here with our chin out. We’ll do the same thing we pulled two days ago, and swing south. They had to pull most of the Wildcats off Suva and post them to isolated bases when those Jap battleships made a run at the place. Now they’ve nothing more than those obsolete Army Aircobras. Hell, they even moved the PBYs back to Pago Pago. That’s where we’ll be fighting this battle next if we don’t stop them here. So we swing south, but stay in range of Suva so I can cover the field with a few Wildcats.”

“And what if they hit us with everything they have? We could lose both *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, and that would leave the Fletcher Group the only flat top we have worth mentioning.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take.”

“A risk *you’ll* have to take... Aw, hell, I didn’t mean it that way. Admiral, sir, my men will back you 110% out here, but I just hope to God you know what you’re doing.”

Halsey gave him just the hint of a smile. “Funny you should mention that,” he said, “because He and I were discussing this situation just last night, and the lord on high tells me he has our back this time. Come about, Captain. Give me 180 South and ahead full. You get the flags up for Mitscher with this, and I’m off to send Fletcher his marching orders east. He’s about to comply with Fleet Order 140, Fifth of May, 1942. I have business elsewhere.”

Halsey was dividing his force in the face of the enemy attack. One day historians might squint and say he was brash, and acted stupidly, but not today, not on the 5th of May, 1942. Most of the men who would analyze and second guess the fighting Admiral were still waiting to be born.

The Battle of the Koro Sea – 5 MAY, 1942

They came out of the north, flying right through tall rising columns of thunder storms to get there. The weather had been so bad in the pre-dawn hours of May 5th that Halsey only had four Wildcats off each of his two carriers up on patrol, and all they could think of was getting out of that turbulence and seeing if they could land in that mess. Heavy seas move a flight deck around quite a bit. You could time a wave set better for takeoff, and even use that to good advantage when the bow would fall away and help a plane get airborne, but landing was a hazardous affair. That deck could suddenly swing up when you didn't expect it , and smack your plane right in the belly.

The Japanese were up in spite of the storm, and out to bring a little thunder and lightning to their enemy. Nagumo's search planes had seen the American fleet late the previous day. Yet morning searches noted one group heading east, another bearing south. Nagumo considered that the withdrawing unit might be no more than bait, and resolved to strike south, keeping his carriers close to the Fijis.

It was a very good guess, and Admiral Hara's 5th Carrier Division led the way, with *Zuikaku*, and light carriers *Zuiho* and *Shoho*. They would open the action with 21 B5N torpedo planes led by Lt. Yoshiaki Subota, the cream of what was left in the fleet for that plane type after Nagumo's disastrous use of the torpedo bombers to conduct that long range strike earlier. Another two *Chutai* of D3A Dive Bombers was led by Lt. Tamatsu Ema, the heavyset bearded wonder of the dive bomber squadrons. His plane was clearly evident in the lead, its scarlet tail impossible to miss. His second *Chutai* was one plane light, but its *Chutachio*, Lieutenant Hayashi, Had boasted he would make up for the missing plane personally.

The men were in high spirits that morning, in spite of the weather, and the gloom that had enfolded Hayashi the last few days dissipated now that the adrenaline of battle was flowing in his blood again. Thos odd dreams of

rockets in the sky no longer bothered him. It was only lightning now, and the occasional rumble of thunder, which seemed to set the scene for him perfectly. They were the Thunder Gods now, he thought. They were out to avenge the loss of their sister ship, *Soaring Crane*.

In spite of the bad weather, the raid was detected on radar about 77 miles out, some 30 minutes before they would get over Halsey's carriers. Even with that lavish grace period, *Enterprise* got no more than three additional Wildcats up to join the CAP patrol, three planes off *Hornet* also scrambled, and more were being spotted, but that group would fly off in the wrong direction and fail to find the Japanese when they bored in on Halsey's position.

The *Big E* was well out in front, and actually entering a squall line when the strike came in, which left *Hornet* and her closest escort, the cruiser *San Francisco*, as the most visible targets. The D3As came in first, with orders to strike the closest escorts to give Ema's torpedo bombers the best chance to put their thunderfish to work. Hayashi would prove true to his word and draw first blood when he put a 250 KG bomb on *San Francisco*, right behind the aft stack. Not to be outdone, Ema came in right after him and scored yet another hit amidships, starting heavy fires there. Now the way was clear for Subota, as *San Francisco* had to fall out of its screening position for the carrier when the ship lost power and slowed to 20 knots.

Subota would lose only two BN5s on the run in, with two more damaged by flak and forced to abort, but the other 17 would all make the attack over those wild seas. The torpedoes, however, had a very rough run into the target, many lost and diverted from their intended course in the battering waves. One would run true and get a torpedo hit on the *Hornet* that penetrated the belt armor and caused significant damage just aft of the island. The high white wash of seawater clearly marked the hit, and Hayashi could see it as he looked over his shoulder after recovering from his dive through a hail of flak. The Thunder Gods had announced their presence, and he clenched his fist, eager to get back to *Zuikaku* and rearm for a second strike.

But fate had other plans for him that day, and they were now churning in the mind of a self proclaimed Fighting Fool, Admiral Bull Halsey. When he got the news, Halsey scratched his neck, where a bright red rash was plaguing him again that morning.

"Is *Hornet* still underway?"

“Yes sir, her speed is good and the flight deck looks clear.”

“Good, thank God we got our boys up before this squall line hit us. They ought to be getting close to the other fellow by now. Why haven’t we heard anything?”

It was a special agony there in the close confines of the main bridge, one eye on the mission board where he was taking in the names of the men he had just set out into that storm, and one ear on the overhead intercom, listening for any sound that could tell him what they were doing. The ceiling above him was a morass of grey cables, all hooking in to some piece of equipment or another, and then snaking off in thick bundles to vanish into the grey guts of the ship. One coiled near the Captain’s Command Announcing System, where many a “now hear this” had been shouted over the last years of duty. Ten red lights sat in two rows of five, each with a thick black switch that would be flipped to activate any of those stations, the Open Bridge, Secondary Conn, Damage Control, Pre-Flight Briefing, AA Stations and more. Now those lights sat dark, the switches all set to the vertical off position.

Halsey’s orders had been given, the men and planes and ships all set in motion by his bawling commands, and now he could only stand there, waiting, listening, eyeing that Mission Board and wondering how many of those men would make it safely back to the ship. This was the hardest part of the job for Halsey, and the skin ailment that had been brought on by all the stress of these last months was making the wait even worse. They had opened a can of ‘Peerless Coffee,’ a Bay Area special that had been roasted there since 1924. Halsey picked up three cans before they left the west coast, but now, as the weather loosened up a bit and *Enterprise* came into the clear, he looked to see the cruiser *San Francisco* burning in his wake.

That ship was supposed to be in Puget Sound for an overhaul, he thought. Well, she’s damn well going to need it now. Look at those fires—my fires. This all happened because I got on that Squawk Box and made it so. Was Murray right? Was I a fool to send Fletcher off with *Wasp* and *Shiloh* like that, and then slip off myself to thump my chest with the Japanese?

Only time would tell....

Chapter 27

Hornet was already skewered by a torpedo hit, though all accounts had her still 'Haze Grey and Underway.' *San Francisco* was having a harder time suppressing those fires but TF-16 was already out for some payback, though they were having difficulty finding the Japanese 5th Carrier division to the north. The thunderheads that had fringed the action against Halsey's group had been moving north during the long hour it took to spot and launch the strike, another hour would pass as the squadrons formed up and moved north, their blue wings dark against the glowering sky.

Lieutenant Grey Davis of VF-6 had the first flight in the vanguard, with Firebaugh, Runyon, and Packard off his wingtips. There were three other flights in the escort, making 16 F4F Wildcats in all. Behind them came Lieutenant Ray Davis with VB-6 and there were 29 SBDs in that formation, and another 26 from VB-8 off the *Hornet*. No torpedo bombers were included in the strike. Halsey had seen their performance in drills, and was not happy with either the pilots or the torpedoes they were carrying, which had a tendency to misfire, run high and wide all too often, or to even fail to detonate for those lucky enough to score a hit. He would lead with his dive bombers, and hold the torpedo planes for a possible second wave.

While the Americans searched north through the gloom, Hara's recovery operation had gone remarkably well. The real front of the storm had not yet reached his carriers, though winds were rising from the south. The relatively calm waters there enabled smooth flight deck operations. The Japanese had the advantage of knowing the exact heading to take back to their carriers, and they got there before most of Halsey's planes could determine where the enemy was. Then came the break-neck effort to get fresh planes ready for action, a job the crews on the hanger deck had been doing even while the recovery was still underway.

Hayashi leapt from his plane and immediately headed below to check on progress, delighted to find there was already another squadron of D3As ready to be lifted up to the flight deck. He wanted one of those planes, unwilling to wait for his own plane to be turned around and prepped again for action. It was his enthusiasm for the action that saw both he and Ema back on the flight

deck half an hour later, each having pulled rank to commandeer planes to get airborne again as soon as possible. They would get at least twelve D3As off *Zuikaku*, each man taking two *Shotai* of three planes. Unwilling to wait for the rest of the groups to be spotted and rise again for action, Ema got permission to look for the strike groups coming south from Carrier Division 2.

Word had been flashed to Nagumo that the American carriers had been found, and already attacked. He had 33 D3As up, and the 12 planes off *Zuikaku* would make that 45. They would be joined by only 4 B5Ns in that second strike, all that was ready on the *Shoho*. The remainder would still be some time arming and fueling. Four *Shotai* of A6M2 Zeroes would escort this strike in, and hoping to surprise the Americans again by coming from a different direction, Ema suggested they make a wide loop to the east around some thunderheads before turning south.

It was that spur of the moment decision by a single man that gave Halsey's carriers just those few minutes more that they needed to get the last of his strike airborne and on its way. They would eventually find Carrier Division 5, and King Kong Hara was in for a very harrowing day.

The SDB was a sturdy, reliable plane, with decent range, and capable of lifting over 2000 pounds of ordnance. The planes were now carrying 1000 pound bombs, twice as heavy as the 500 pound bombs delivered by the Japanese dive bombers. Of the 55 SDBs up that day, only three would be taken down by the relatively light Zero escort, which had enough to do in trying to fend off the 16 American Wildcats. 11 more of the Dauntless dive bombers would take damage from both fighters and enemy flak, but of the 52 that were still flying, most all would get those 1000 pounders in the air, and today they were going to be very good.

The American flyers knew their back was now against the wall. They had lost *Lexington* at Pearl, *Saratoga* and *Yorktown* went down in the Coral Sea, and they knew the enemy had already put a torpedo into the *Hornet*. They had to turn the tide soon or the war would simply slip from their grasp. They simply had to hurt the Japanese now, and they did.

The *Lucky Crane* saw her luck run out that day, with three successive flight deck hits and a whole lot of whooping and shouting when the US pilots saw the tall columns of dark smoke broil up from the carrier. Halsey's wait was finally over when the radio was suddenly alive with the heated calls of

his pilots. One voice cut through it all, and finally put a smile on his heavy face. *“Hot damn! Look at that Jap carrier burn!”*

The SBDs were going to get 10 hits that day, an astounding 20% of what they carried to the fight. Two more would hit *Zuikaku*, wrecking elevators, igniting ready ammo, blasting away three planes on the fiery deck, and putting that carrier completely out of business, with a ten degree list to starboard. *Zuiho* took two hits, the second setting off her Aviation fuel storage bunker with a resulting explosion that literally wrecked the ship. The last three got *Shoho*, putting heavy damage on that carrier and shutting down the small flight deck. The ship would not survive, her list too heavy to stop by counter flooding, her fires simply uncontrollable.

In one fell swoop, Hara's 5th Carrier division was literally destroyed as a viable fighting force. King Kong himself was wounded in action from bomb splinters that flayed the bridge on *Zuikaku*. It had been his unlucky fate to see his carrier division savaged again, and this time the *Lucky Crane* would be fortunate if it could even safely reach the nearest friendly port at Noumea. With shock and shame consuming him as he watched *Shoho* roll over and die, he sent a signal to Nagumo informing him of the damage. *“Shoho lost, remainder of division carriers have suffered heavy damage and must withdraw.”*

When that news reached the bridge of *Akagi*, there was an audible hiss from one of the junior officer's quick intake of breath. One minute they were filled with jubilation. The American carriers had been found, hit by Hara's pilots, and a second strike was already in the air. The next minute 5th Carrier Division was stricken from the rolls of active combatants.

Nagumo's expression was cold and stoic, yet one man noticed the small tremor in his white gloved hand, his jaw tight, eyes narrow. The outcome of this battle was now riding the thunderheads with his dive bombers.

* * *

The second strike, mostly from Carrier Division 1 was over the American task force a little after noon, the skies still slate grey, and a light rain beginning to fall. They did not yet know what had befallen their brothers with Carrier Division 5, and if they had it would have probably made them just a little more rash, a little more determined, but a little less effective with anger

clouding over the stony calm a good dive bomber needed to ply his craft.

They were going to be very good that day as well. *Pensacola* took the first hit, very near the wound she had suffered the previous January. It seemed the enemy was rubbing salt there, but the scrappy cruiser was not seriously hurt. The chopping recoil of the flak guns punctuated the hour for Halsey now, drowning out the last of the chatter he had been listening to over the radio set. He knew enough to realize his flyers had hurt the enemy, but now he ran outside to the weather deck just in time to see two bombs straddle the *Enterprise*, one striking very near the bow, its explosion close enough to score the metal with the claw marks of shrapnel.

The second bomb was close amidships, the belt armor taking the brunt of that near hit. *Big E* would get off easy that day, for those were the only two bombs that would touch her. *Hornet's* luck was not so good. That ship was going to take four more bomb hits, the after elevators useless, and a deck fire there impeding any further flight deck operations. One struck near the island, the concussion nearly blasting open the lower hatch and shaking the bridge some 50 feet above. Another did the real damage when it penetrated the flight deck, plunged down into the hanger deck and even blew through that as well. The explosion took out two TBDs that had just been refueled and armed, and the fires were severe.

That hit shook the ship so hard that the temporary hull patch the engineers were working on to seal off that earlier torpedo hit was shaken loose and the sea rushed in again, sweeping three men away and flooding two more compartments before they could seal off those hatches. Soon that water would begin to overwhelm the pumps, and *Hornet* was settling heavily into the water, listing to port and smothered with thick black smoke. Mitscher was almost certain that the carrier had been struck a fatal blow, and began passing the word for the crews to make ready to abandon ship. It wasn't the steel ship he was worried about any longer, but the 3000 men that were riding its burning back.

It was going to cost that strike wing a single Zero, six Vals, one of the four Kates, and thirteen other Vals damaged by flak in that attack. That was a small price to pay for the *Hornet*, and Halsey's only solace was the fact that he had hit all three carriers in that first attack, and *Big E* was still alive and well. His boys would return, many having to divert to Suva from VF-8 and VB-8 off the *Hornet*. Then he would work like a madman to get those planes

turned over and ready to go again. *Enterprise* would manage to get 31 SBDs up again, but with only six Wildcats in escort. This time they side swiped the burning Carrier Division 5, and followed a small flight of planes that were heading north. There they found Carrier Division 1, and right there between the two flattops was the biggest battleship they had ever laid eyes on.

The weather was terrible, with the same row of thunderstorms that had swept over the US task force earlier, but down they came. Only one would get lucky enough to do any serious harm, and it was *Akagi* that would shake with that hit, which set off aviation fuel on the hanger deck and started a hot fire that was serious enough to halt operations. *Soryu* wasn't touched, but the tremor in Nagumo's hand was visibly noticeable now, and he hid it in his jacket pocket. The realization of what had just happened was only too evident. Carrier Division 5 was gone. Most of the surviving planes were diverted to the pot marked airfield near Nandi on the main Fiji Island, but there was not enough aviation support there to sustain operations indefinitely. *Akagi* had her nice new refit spoiled by that hit, though Nagumo believed the ship could be made operational within a few hours.

Yet in those hours, there was only *Soryu* out there as the sole remaining operational carrier in the *Kido Butai*. The *Blue Dragon* was all that remained.

* * *

Even Thunder Gods fall.

Lieutenant Hayashi learned that the hard way when his battered D3A finally reached Nandi. He was down off the plane, seeing soldiers from a Naval infantry battalion pushing a B5N aside to clear the small portion of the runway that was still functional. That set his mind on finding his good friend Subota, and he ran off toward a small group of torpedo bombers, hoping to find him there. What he found instead was the terrible news that his comrade was seen in a bad tail spin dive, right at the edge of a thunder storm.

His eyes wide, a frantic look on his face, Hayashi turned and ran back to his dive bomber, pushing a sergeant aside and climbing up, heedless of the man's shouts that the airfield could not be cleared for his takeoff. He tried to turn his engine over. He'd get out there and find Subota. It was the only thing to do, but the plane simply sputtered and died, its fuel exhausted. He had been lucky to make that landing safely, and his D3A wasn't going anywhere

until it could be serviced.

Hayashi felt the wave of despair sweep over him, his eyes glassy. He imagined Subota's plane going down in that wild sea, imagined him alone out there at the edge of that storm, watching the lightning, hearing the raucous boom of the thunder, feeling the hard cold rain on his face. It would be a fitting death, but even as he thought that, he bent forward, both fists at his forehead, and leaned heavily on his flight panel, the tears streaking the char of smoke on his face. The Marine Sergeant saw him there, and said nothing more. He took off his cap, rubbed his chin, and strode away.

* * *

The *Blue Dragon* was all that remained....

That was the one burning thought in Yamamoto's mind as soon as the battle ended. What if he had listened to that truculent officer from *Takami* and watched those rockets savage this American attack? No, he had decided to fight this battle on even terms, but the losses the *Kido Butai* had sustained were very heavy relative to the damage he inflicted on his enemy. He knew they had sunk at least one American fleet carrier, but for that they traded *Zuikaku*. Admiral Hara sadly reported that he did not think they could save the ship. *Shoho* was also gone, leaving only *Zuiho* still afloat, but out of the war for at least four months or longer. Hara's group was a broken sword.

At least *Akagi* was not seriously hurt, and could probably be fully operational in a few days. Yet now so many questions crowded his mind wanting answers. Could he adequately cover the delivery of the Tanaka Regiment to Nandi with only one fully operational carrier? His fuel reserve was now at 55%, and he could not linger here for very much longer. What about all those planes and pilots that had diverted to Nandi and Tavua? They would have to hold their own for a time until Army planes relieved them, but it would not be wise to leave those experienced carrier trained pilots there on the islands. A look at his plane inventory found him with only 141 planes at sea including five B5Ns stranded on the *Zuiho*, unable to take off.

And what of the enemy? If we have sunk only one enemy fleet carrier here, he thought, where were the other two? They were undoubtedly further east near Samoa, but for how long? This American Admiral was aggressive enough to divide his task force in the face of the storm, and yet he held his

own against the full might of the *Kido Butai*. That is very disturbing. And what might come of the operation in the north? Will *Takami* be able to protect the northern fleet from this Russian Sea Demon? What might happen to *Kaga* and *Tosa*?

All these questions created a reasonable doubt that he could continue operations now. Without any discussion, he ordered the carriers to withdraw west. They would rendezvous with a tanker and refuel.

Nagumo bowed solemnly, but said nothing when he received the order. He knew the calculus that must be running through Yamamoto's mind now, and his own instincts would be to do the very same thing. They must move west now, refuel, assess the condition of *Akagi*, and sort out the shattered naval squadrons into some reasonable order. Perhaps further operations could be contemplated at that time, but not today—not on the 5th of May, 1942.

Part X

The 7 Keys

*“Darkness is but a door, frightening not because it opens,
but out of fear that it will never close”*

— Jonathan Jena

Chapter 28

The Japanese situation on Fiji was much more serious than even Yamamoto knew. The 1st USMC Division had moved aggressively north against the Sakaguchi Detachment. That was bringing three full combat ready regiments against one, even though Sakaguchi could rightfully say he was commanding a relatively strong brigade. He had an engineer battalion attached to his three battalion regiment, and there were also two battalions of SNLF Naval Marines under his command.

The Japanese were not entirely aware of the full strength of their enemy, or that Vandegrift's division now had four full regiments, the 1st, 5th, 7th and 11th Marines. Two more were in theater at Pago Pago from the 2nd Marine Division. This force was more than a match for Sakaguchi, and the sharp meeting engagement at the edge of the heavy jungle soon checked his advance, and then pushed him into a stubborn withdrawal.

It was lack of adequate supply that was hindering his operation more than anything. He had sent the three infantry battalions and one SNLF battalion off lightly supplied, intending to quickly storm into Suva from the north. Now he had been stopped cold and pushed back, and his men were tired and hungry, with many companies almost completely out of ammunition. The Japanese had no choice but to continue their retreat in that sector, and by the 8th of May, the US Marines had pushed to within 15 kilometers of the small port of Tavua and the airfield about five clicks inland.

Further south, the Abe Detachment, and Kimura's Recon Regiment had better luck. They doggedly pursued the withdrawal of the New Zealand troops, pushing them off a temporary holding action along the Singatana River leading down to Nayawa on the coast. Weary after the long march from Nandi, the Kiwis needed rest, supplies and fresh ammo of their own. General Patch therefore sent first the 164th Regiment of his Pacifica Division, and then the 182nd, both marching along the Queens Road that followed the coast east.

By the time they stabilized the line, and relieved all the Kiwis, the Japanese had nearly overrun the makeshift airstrip at Korolevu. With both regiments finally formed up, and with the full division artillery behind them,

Patch was confident he could hold the line.

The situation the Japanese soon found themselves in was now far from satisfactory. Abe and Kimura had been stopped, Sakaguchi pushed back, and the long awaited reinforcements in the Tanaka Regiment were still far to the east near Noumea where they had been held in place pending the outcome of the naval battle. Now that the *Kido Butai* was withdrawing, the only Navy presence would be the flock of planes and pilots that had come fluttering in to Nandi and Tavua fields, unable to land again on their carriers, which was somewhat ominous in itself.

General Tsuchihashi of the 48th Division had adequate supply near the two landing sites, but little or no transport. It was only after he received the report that Sakaguchi had failed to make the sweeping maneuver against Suva, that he now contemplated his situation in a darker light. Somehow, the enemy had achieved parity, he thought.

There may have been more enemy troops here than we believed, and now the navy is withdrawing. Those planes and pilots that landed here will most likely not remain long as well, for the Admirals will want their pilots of the Misty Lagoon back directly. Thus far, 4th Air Fleet has sent nothing but Bombers to Noumea, but no land based fighters. The range was so far from there that any practical use of those planes was prohibited until the runways could be expanded on Fiji to accommodate them. It appears that we are in for a bit of a siege here. Under the circumstances, I must suspend further offensive action until Tanaka arrives... if he arrives at all.

Thus far we have swept all before us, except for that brief delay on Singapore, most likely due to Nishimura's foolishness. My division bested the Americans in the Philippines easily enough, and the Dutch were no match for us. Yet I really have no more than half my division here, and Sakaguchi's troops were not as good as my men. So we wait for Tanaka, and hopefully it will not be necessary to request further reinforcements.

If wishes were horses... It was going to be necessary sooner than the general believed, for a new war had begun there on that island. In Fedorov's history it began somewhere else, in the fetid, humid jungles of Guadalcanal. This time it was Viti Levu, though as the naval battle was being fought, engineers and elements of the 3rd SNLF had also landed at Lunga on the island of Guadalcanal. They were surveying the ground along the north coast for good airfield sites, and the place looked very promising. Whether the

long, grueling struggle there would ever repeat itself remained to be seen. For the moment the center of the gyre was Fiji, where both sides were now arm wrestling to gain the advantage.

On the American side of the equation, both Patch and Vandegrift thought they could win this one. Their enemy would be stalwart and it would be a difficult battle, but they believed they had the sheer mass to do the job. If the two divisions they already had on Viti Levu were not enough, there were two more in Australia and New Zealand, much closer to Fiji than any reinforcements the enemy could call upon.

While Halsey had held off the powerful Japanese Navy, he was now under strict orders not to engage with the last two carriers the US possessed. He wouldn't have to. Yamamoto was gone, and he had free reign in the Fijis now, and a good base at Pago Pago that had been receiving plenty of fuel via tankers. There was no way the enemy could pull a Pearl Harbor, for Allied units in the Fijis would surely spot any attempt to attack Samoa.

For now, the fighting Admiral would find he had 123 operational planes between *Enterprise*, *Wasp* and *Shiloh*. The *Antietam* would be repaired this week, and add another 20 more, so the raw naval aviation available to either side in the theater was a dead wash. The US was getting in more ground aviation support, a couple Seabee Battalions to work on putting more airfields into use, particularly on the adjacent island of Vanua Levu.

Unless strongly supported by carriers, Halsey believed that he could prevent any strong reinforcement of the Fiji position by the Japanese. But developments further up the chain of islands leading all the way back to Rabaul were somewhat foreboding. The Japanese now had a magnificent anchorage at Tulagi, and had landed on Guadalcanal. They had Espiritu Santo in the Santa Cruz Islands linking the Solomons to the New Hebrides, and were masters of the Solomon Sea. They had airfields building up at Lae, Port Moresby, Buka and a seaplane base in the Shortlands.

While none of these bases were really well established yet, they would be developed over time. Halsey proposed that he return to the fast raiding style that had seen him open this campaign in the Gilberts. He sent a message to Nimitz asking for permission to raid the New Hebrides, and all these other bases once he could rest assured there was no additional ground force being aimed at Fiji. Nimitz gave him that leeway, but stressed that he was not to engage in any situation where he might now find himself facing significant

enemy naval air power.

Weakened by the heavy losses to their carriers in the Coral and Koro Seas, where Halsey had fought that last desperate battle, the US could not really consider any further offensive moves against other Japanese held territory until they received more carriers. Unfortunately, only one might be expected soon, the first in a series of twelve *Essex* class carriers that were now building. Halsey knew that his enemy had further resources in their Home Islands, and still had a much stronger carrier fleet. It had taken the loss of three fleet carriers to blunt the Japanese attack into Fiji, and unhinge Operation FS. Their lance pierced the US shield before it broke, and the enemy was well established in the Fiji Group. The only question now was whether they would return soon with reinforcements, or whether the small advantages the US now possessed based on position, logistics, and their “ground game” would win through for them.

Nimitz was very worried now, and afraid that one more big loss in the South Pacific could set back the US war effort there for a full year. “It would take us that long to build up our strength again,” he said to Admiral King. “Particularly in the carrier arm of the fleet. Oh, Halsey fought well down there, but we just can’t let him put either *Enterprise* or *Wasp* at risk now. I’m calling him home to Pearl.”

“What for? Just because he’s a fighter? We need men like that down there.”

“True, but Halsey is exhausted. He’s carried our entire war on his back, fought the Japs hard, but the man needs rest. That skin condition that’s been bothering him is now much worse. I’m ordering him hospitalized.”

“Who’s taking over? You aren’t going to hand those last flattops back to Fletcher, are you?”

“Ray Spruance.”

“Well hell, he’s another Black Shoe Admiral. Wasn’t he on the *Mississippi*?”

“And he did a fine job there. He’s on the *Northampton*, and I’m flagging him for the duty today. Halsey is flying out to Canton Island and taking a destroyer to Pearl. Spruance can hold things together until he gets back.”

“Fletcher won’t like it.”

“He had his chance in the Coral Sea and we lost two good ships there. So Fletcher stays with that battleship squadron.”

And that was that. Nimitz knew Halsey was as good as they came, but not in this situation, not with him weary, hurting, stung by the loss of so many good ships and men, and down with medical problems. Like the ships he fought, he needed refit and replenishment too. The Fighting Admiral would return soon enough, when the *Essex* was ready, but for now Ray Spruance was in charge of the South Pacific Fleet.

“Now then,” said Nimitz. “What do you make of this Siberian adventure up north?”

“Damn interesting,” said King. “Their head honcho over there has been making overtures about opening up airfields for us on Kamchatka. I’m not sure it would do us any good to put B-17s up there—the weather is horrible. But we’ve opened talks with the Siberians along those lines. I think we should take advantage of this.”

“What would you suggest?”

“I think we should see about sending them a couple Seabee battalions to help improve those airfields. We could put DC-3s in there at Petropavlovsk on Kamchatka, and then hop them over to Northern Sakhalin, and on to Irkutsk—set up a nice little air bridge to the Siberians and offer them supplies and aviation support. That’s what they’ve been asking for. We also ought to get some kind of outpost in the Aleutians, a good link to Kamchatka. But what’s all this talk I’ve been hearing about this Siberian battleship?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But something bushwhacked the Japs on their way home from Pearl.”

“HYPO has been picking up some real strange signals traffic whenever the Siberians operate. But this is one code they just can’t crack. That said, whenever they do get these signals, we later learn there’s been some trouble with the Japanese fleet. In fact, we now think the Siberians might have had something to do with the sinking of that carrier limping home from Pearl.”

Nimitz frowned. “I thought it was a submarine.”

“It would be nice if it was, but it wasn’t one of ours. HYPO says they got a lot of this odd signals traffic just before that ship went down.”

“Well radio waves don’t sink ships,” said Nimitz.

“Something did, and now we think the Siberians have a big battleship up north supporting these operations. HYPO’s picked up a new code word the Japs are using about it—*Mizuchi*. There was some kind of scrap during those landings on Kamchatka, and we think they Japs got the worst of it.”

“Must be one hell of a battleship, but where in hell did the Siberians get the damn thing? You know they can’t build anything like that.”

“No, it had to come from the Soviets. I think Sergie Kirov is trading off with the Siberians in exchange for troop support. God knows, he needs all the help he can get, and the Siberians need naval support. But we should look real hard at this situation. What we’ve got here is the fledgling makings of a second front against Japan in the North. If the Siberians mean business, and that can be developed, we ought to support them any way we can. I’m going to recommend that we sneak quietly into the Aleutians and at least set up good observation posts there. An airfield would be even better. Then those DC-3s could hop from Seattle to Dutch Harbor, or even Adak, and on to Petropavlovsk. This is an opportunity we shouldn’t over look.”

“It’s a thousand miles from Petropavlovsk to the nearest big Japanese city. That would be Sapporo on Hokkaido, and our B-17s couldn’t even get there and back with a typical load of 1000 pound bombs.”

“Which is why this situation shaping up on Sakhalin Island is interesting,” said King. “It’s only 700 miles to Sapporo if we get a base up there near where the Siberians have landed. Now imagine if they have what it takes to push on further south.” King pulled out a map, Pointing to the center of Sakhalin. “If we could get airfields here, then all of Hokkaido is easily within range of our B-17s, and when we get the new B-29, we could strike any city in Japan from there. How long would it take us to fight our way close enough to Japan from the South Pacific? Suppose we take Guam back, or Tinian. That’s still over 1400 miles from Tokyo. Only the B-29s could make that, but from central or southern Sakhalin, we could hit Tokyo with B-17s.”

“Air Force talk,” said Nimitz. “Leave that to them.”

“Yes, but the Navy has to get them the bases they’ll need for the job. That’s on our watch. Now, we can slug it out with the Japs from one island to the next down there, and it could take us a couple years to get close enough for that fight to matter. Yet at this very moment, we’ve got the Siberians over there putting troops on Sakhalin and showing every intention of pushing south to reclaim that entire island.”

“The Japanese will fight like hellcats to prevent that. If we can see this, they can see it too.” Nimitz leaned back, thinking. “Yet I agree that we ought to support them any way we can. When do you go to the president with this?”

“Next week. In the meantime, you keep an ear to the ground on what’s going on over there for me. Tell your boys in HYPO to listen real good for this signals traffic they say they’ve picked up. If we can get some subs up there to have a good look around, all the better. This could be bigger than we think. We need to sit up and pay attention.”

“Alright, Rey” said Nimitz. “I’ll see what I can do. If the Siberians can help take the pressure off us down south, all the better.”

Chapter 29

“**Well now,**” said Tovey. “The planning is sound, at least for the approach to the target. It’s high time we get on with it. The tides will be right on the 9th and 10th.”

So many events in this history had come early, even if by just a few months, but this one was running late. It was supposed to have happened on the 28th of March. Instead, many of the men earmarked for the operation had been deployed to the Canary Islands. Now that a kind of stalemate had been reached in that battle, it was time to look at the plans again, and the Royal Navy was eager to begin.

The raid itself would have happened at one time or another, for the facilities targeted were simply too valuable to the enemy to let them stand. After the delay imposed by the defense of the Canary Islands, it might have been a long year before this plan was teed up again, but the disruptive fate line of a man who was supposed to be dead had nudged the event back into place.

That man was Lieutenant Patrick Lainson Field, the commander of the British submarine *Seawolf*, a boat that had been oddly diverted from other duty to patrol off the Canary Islands. Lieutenant Field, wasn’t supposed to be there that day. He was to have died in a plane crash on the 16th of December, 1941, shot down over the Bay of Biscay while en-route to Gibraltar. Yet there were no British planes being routed to Gibraltar now, and the route that plane took this time to the Azores was well away from the peril that would have taken his life. So Lieutenant Field survived, one of many thousands of souls who should have died, but lived on in these Altered States.

There, on a misplaced submarine in the dark of the night, one lonesome and dangerous wolf was prowling the dark seas, commanded by the flesh and blood figure of a man who should be dead—a Zombie, as Professor Dorland might define him. In Dorland’s theory, such men are always wildcards in the deck of fate, for once spared the doom that should have ended their lives, they move and act with unbridled license on the Meridians of time. Their intervention can bring sudden and unexpected derailment to the careful train of events running on the long lines of causality, and that was one such night

for Lieutenant Patrick Field.

It was his good fortune to stumble across the German task force intending to land the 98th Mountain Regiment for Operation Condor. There, he clearly saw the towering silhouette of a great warship, not even knowing that he was looking at the mighty *Hindenburg*. It had been framed with the light of *Bismarck*'s salvo in support of the German attack, and Field's heart thumped faster as he beat his crew to quarters, loading all six of his forward tubes. He would get one hit, but it would be a good one, right beneath Anton turret near the magazines and lifting gear for those massive 16-inch shells. The resulting flooding put that turret out of action, much to the chagrin of its resident master and chief, one Axel Faust.

The presence of both *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg* in French waters was most alarming to the British. The mayhem they could cause had recently been seen in the battle off Fuerteventura, where the cream of the Royal Navy was thrown into the fight, and with heavy losses. While the *Bismarck* would be laid up for many more months at Toulon, the *Hindenburg* was very near operational readiness. The German ship had been wounded by Lieutenant Fields, but not sunk, and then it had taken three rocket hits from the *Argos Fire*, and a 14-inch round from *King George V*. now it seemed that Admiral Raeder was keen to accelerate repairs and get the dreadful battleship fully operational again.

Initially it had gone to Toulon, where superficial damage had been cleared up, and new secondary gun barrels shipped in by rail. After the damage to the superstructure was repaired, there was still work needed on the hull to fully repair that torpedo hit, and Toulon did not have a dry dock large enough to accommodate the German ship. But there was one at Saint Nazaire, the famous *Normandie* dry dock, built to accommodate the massive 80,000 ton liner *Normandie* before the newest French battleship stole away her name. It was 50 meters wide, and 350 meters long, with massive caisson steel gates at either end that weighed 1500 tons.

In a stealthy night move, *Hindenburg* moved from Toulon to Gibraltar, and Ian Fleming's spy network in Spain learned that it would move to Saint Nazaire under heavy German air cover in five days. In one sense, the British sighed with relief. The ship was not yet ready, instead it was merely transferring to a larger facility for continued repairs. The question now was what to do about that. The Royal Navy could either risk another confrontation

at sea with the German battleship, one that might send more of their own ships to the dry docks, or they could try to get at the enemy ship with the RAF. Neither plan seemed palatable.

“We simply cannot risk forcing yet another engagement at sea,” said Admiral Pound. “Churchill would want that, but I have *Duke of York*, and *King George V* down well south of the Azores. That’s the only thing keeping the Germans at bay in the Canaries. *Invincible* is up near the Denmark Strait with *Hood* working out after her refit, and keeping an eye on *Tirpitz* and the Norwegian Sea.”

“You’re right,” said Tovey. “Churchill would want all four of those ships to pile on—anything to get the *Hindenburg*. But this plan being floated by the Commandos has my interest. They’re calling it Operation Chariot.”

“What’s it all about?” Pound looked very weary, as he always did. A bad hip kept him awake at night, robbing him of much needed sleep, which he often recouped at staff meetings, nodding off in the middle of the proceedings.

“A raid... On the very same dry docks the Germans need for the repair of the *Hindenburg*. If they can’t use Saint Nazaire, then they’ll have to use divers and that will take a good long while to repair the torpedo hit *Seawolf* put into that monster.”

“Why not simply bomb them?”

“Too inaccurate,” said Tovey. “Besides, we’ve asked the RAF for a hundred bombers, we got thirty-four, and eight of those have already been lost trying to raid that port. It’s crawling with German Flak now, and there’s always a standing patrol of Messerschmitts up over the harbor. That will go double next week when *Hindenburg* pulls in.”

“Triple,” said Pound.

“A pity we can’t sneak in a submarine.”

“Not possible,” said Tovey. “The port is six miles deep in the estuary of the Loire River. The sand bars restrict the approach to only one good channel, and its heavily covered by shore batteries and screened by anti-sub nets.”

“Well what do these bloody Commandos think they’re about? Do they plan to paddle in on rubber rafts?”

“Not quite,” said Tovey. “They want a destroyer. In fact, we gave them one, an old American ship from the lend lease lot, *Campbeltown*.”

“A destroyer? Through that gauntlet of shore batteries in the channel?”

“Actually they’ve proposed going right over the sand bars to avoid that, and gain a little element of surprise. But they’ve had to lighten the draft of the ship considerably. Everything but one battery’s been thrown off.”

“Good God,” said Pound, realizing what this plan must be contemplating. “You mean to say they are going to try and ram the steel gate to the main dry dock?”

“No sir... well... not entirely. Yes, they’ll ram it alright, but the destroyer has been packed chock full of amatol explosives taken from 24 depth charges, about four and a quarter tons I’m told, all rigged up with an elaborate delayed fuse. They’ve placed these explosives about 40 feet from the bow, so the collision is only meant to get the ship near the target. Those heavy steel gates would easily withstand that collision anyway. However, when that fuse runs out, the real thunder rolls, and that should do the job. Other Commando teams will accompany the *Campbeltown* on either side, and conduct raids against the Pump House and Winding Rooms for those gates.”

“I see... And assuming any of this is successful, how do the men get out?”

“That’s just it sir. They may not get out at all. This is very likely a one way ticket.”

“Preposterous!”

“Churchill likes it, and its either this or we pull at least two battleships off assigned duty and rush them to a position close enough to intercept the *Hindenburg* on its run north from Gibraltar. To do that we must issue the orders tonight. If the Germans persist, then we get another battle. I’m perfectly willing to take that on, if the Navy wants to assume the risk.”

Pound shook his head. “Six months ago I would have waved you forward into battle without a moment’s hesitation. Now, after losing six battleships and a battlecruiser, I’m not so eager. It would seem to me that we might better let this German ship sneak into Saint Nazaire, and then see about using the remainder of those RAF bombers. Even a few hits might keep her bottled up for some time, and if not, then we’ll muster a watch from the Azores again.”

“Which merely punts the ball concerning that engagement at sea, because one day or another, that ship will make a run for the Atlantic. They can choose any day they want in the year ahead, but we’ll have to cover them all,

and with at least two battleships. Now... We'll have *Howe* available this month. She's ready to start sea trials now. But posting her to that watch with a green crew would be risky. I'd rather see *King George V* and *Duke Of York* on the job, and even those two may not be enough. Frankly, I think it will need *Invincible* again, which is yet another argument for more 16-inch guns on our battleships."

"We could recall *Nelson* from Alexandria."

"Too slow," Tovey dismissed that at once. "So, Admiral, suppose we let these Commandos have a go. Yes, we may lose one old destroyer and some good men, but shutting down that dry dock is a heady compensation, and I think I can facilitate this little mission to ensure better chances of success."

That was something Tovey had in his pocket now, a little 'facilitation' teed up from a ship Pound knew nothing about. The *Argos Fire* had been operating secretly in the Atlantic for some time, but was never officially listed or mentioned in any report. Yes, men saw the ship, and rumors flared about it, all heavily frowned upon and quickly squelched by Tovey and any other senior officer that knew the real truth about that ship. Admiral Fraser was one such man, one of Tovey's early recruits to the Watch. The two men conferred on the matter before they went to Pound to obtain final permission to set Operation Chariot in motion.

"Admiral," Tovey had said, "I think we have a little Ace in the hole here in *Argos Fire*." He had briefed Fraser concerning that ship, and the true nature of the Russian ship *Kirov* as well. Like Cunningham at Alexandria, Fraser was now 'in the know' and a strong addition to the Watch.

"*Argos* has been serving us well as a convoy escort. It's that advances radar and sonar that make the ship so valuable. They can locate German wolfpacks, and the convoy can give them a wide berth before they come into contact. We haven't lost a single ship in any convoy where *Argos Fire* was prowling about, mostly well out in the vanguard, where even the Convoy Masters don't know they have such a powerful guardian angel watching out for them."

"What do you propose?"

"They've a pair of helicopters that are rather amazing—very fast, well armed, and capable of lifting in a couple heavy squads of Commandos. In fact, the ship carries a contingent of 50 such men. They fought for us on the sly in Syria during Operation Scimitar. Handy chaps in those helicopters. I

believe they can help this Operation Chariot along, which will mean that we may not have to take in so many Motor Launch boats to get Commandos in after the Pump House and Winding Rooms. They can also carry demolition charges, and drop them right on the roof of that Pump House, or anywhere else the Commandos need them.”

“What about the German flak batteries?”

“These little birds have quite a sting,” said Tovey. “I’m told they can lay down some fairly effective suppressive fire, and in fact, that will be a good part of their primary role—to take out German gun positions. Then, when all is said and done, they can lift the men out. It will mean the raid can go with far fewer men—fewer to lose or leave behind.”

“And the *Campbeltown*?”

“Still invited. Yes, we’ll need the whole of that four plus tons of amatol to blow those steel gates. Not even *Argos Fire* has anything in its larders that can bother them.”

“When would this happen?”

“If Fleming’s boys have it right, *Hindenburg* is planning to steal into the harbor on the night of the 16th of May. Moon conditions are right, new on the 15th, though the sun is setting very late, at 21:37. I’d say the night would be thick an hour later, no moon, and pitch black. That’s when they want to bring her in, and we’ll have similar conditions two days prior, so we go the 14th, on a night when high tides will nearly hit 6 meters. That’s to help *Campbeltown* along. It had to be nearly gutted to lighten her draft for passage over the sandbars. As for those helicopters, they’ll be ready on a moment’s notice, and I might add this ship has a few other tricks up its sleeve. It can take down German air cover, see everything on its radars, and deal with those nasty German shore batteries.”

“At night? How would they spot them?”

“No worries there, Admiral Fraser. They have powerful night optics.”

“How very interesting,” said Fraser. “Might I have a look at this ship one day?”

“Why Admiral, I thought you’d never ask. It will be off the Clyde tonight, and the two of us have a dinner appointment. In fact, they’ll send out one of those helicopters to give us both a lift over. I would like to introduce you to a most interesting Captain and crew, and the CEO of the ship is really quite charming herself.”

“*Herself?* And did I just hear you say CEO?”
Tovey smiled.

Chapter 30

“**Virtually** all of France’s modern capital ships were built in the Brittany ports,” said Tovey, “Brest in the north and Saint Nazaire in the south. Between them is Lorient, a major site for German U-boat pens. They have them at Saint Nazaire as well, but they won’t be the objective of this mission. We want to shut down the big *Normandie* Dry Dock—blast away those steel gates and render it useless, and before the Germans move the *Hindenburg* there.”

“I’d think you might want it there,” said Mack Morgan, the black bearded intelligence master aboard *Argos Fire*. “Isn’t that a good spot for the RAF to find that ship?”

“You might think as much,” said Tovey, “But Bombers come at a premium these days. We asked for them, but only 28 remain allocated to the Channel Ports and Brittany. To hit Saint Nazaire, they either have to fly over all those nasty German fighter fields on the Brittany Peninsula, or go well out to sea to get past them. So Jerry gets plenty of warning, and a good portion of their Ack Ack guns are dedicated to stopping a raid coming in from the sea.”

They were all meeting in the private stateroom aboard *Argos Fire*, Admirals Tovey and Fraser, with Captain MacRae, Mack Morgan, and of course the cordial host, Elena Fairchild.

“I know this raid,” said MacRae. “It was the stuff of legend as these operations go, and the plan works, I can tell you that much. Unfortunately, it costs you more than half the raiding force, to say nothing of that old destroyer.”

“Yes,” said Tovey, “*Campbeltown*. Well, it’s to be considered expendable. What we are here today for is to see about that other liability, the loss of so many good men. I was thinking you might lend a hand.”

“Anything to get us off those long boring convoy runs,” said Morgan. “All I ever find time to do on them is grow this beard.”

“Well you’ve done us a great service there—not a single merchantman lost under your watch, and you’re to be commended. Once we get more escort carriers, your ship will become the primary command center for the Battle of the Atlantic, that is if you don’t mind taking on that job. With those

radars and sonars of yours, you can vector in the escort carriers and they'll do the job. For now, we've got something a little more exciting in mind."

"How can we help?" asked Elena. "I'm afraid we've not much in the way of missile power to strike a hard target. How many are left, Captain?"

"Just the ten Harpoons. We threw every last Gealbaum we had at *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* in that scrap off Fuerteventura. I like to think we hurt them, but I'm not sure we really did. It's more likely those big battleship guns that did the real damage."

"In this case," said Tovey, "it was a torpedo fired by a lucky submarine, the *Seawolf*, and that ship still has residual torpedo damage that I put on it during our first real engagement. That's why the Germans want to move *Hindenburg* to Saint Nazaire. They can repair that torpedo damage very quickly there, and trying to do the same job with divers would take a good deal longer. We want to take that option away from them."

"Just to keep *Hindenburg* laid up a few more weeks, or perhaps a month at best?"

"Yes," said Tovey. I know it seems callous, but there it is. Gentlemen, Miss Fairchild, I've got two battleships operating from Funchal, and two more watching the Iceland-Faeroes passage. We've one more coming off sea trials soon, and another right behind it, the *Anson* and *Howe*. I need time to get them into the game."

Mack Morgan had a pad device, and he had tapped up the history on this raid. "Admiral, it says here that you sent 622 men into that raid. Only 228 made it back to England. That's a high price for that time."

"Well that's where you come in. You see, a good many of those men were to come in on Motor Launch boats to engage and eliminate flak gun positions around the southern quays, with a few auxiliary targets assigned to them. If you could find a way to take those targets out, these men would not have to be sent."

"Why send good men when a missile could do the job," said MacRae. "Aye, we could certainly help out."

"We also wondered about those helicopters that gave us a ride over this evening. They could be very handy in a pinch when it comes time to get the men out."

"Aye, that's a fact," said MacRae. "Just how many targets are we looking at here, considering I've got only ten harpoons for this whale."

“We’ve identified five shore battery sites—and a dozen other AA batteries and machinegun bunkers. We may not have to get them all, but some will definitely have to be engaged and destroyed if at all possible. I’m afraid naval bombardment by our own ships would be both risky and inaccurate.”

“But not naval bombardment by my ship,” said MacRae with a smile. “I assume the risk is from enemy aircraft, well we can stop those easily enough. Now I’ve been laughed off more than once by the blokes on the docks in the Azores when we replenish. They call us the ‘Toothless Wonder,’ and aye, that deck gun we have up front doesn’t look like awful much. But I can put good penetrating rounds on just about any target you name, and from well over the horizon. Our helicopters can spot for us. We wouldn’t even have to use the Harpoons.”

“Speaking of the X-3s,” Mack Morgan put in, “one of those supply ships in that replenishment convoy we happened upon was meant for underway replenishment at sea, and also to support British ground and air units ashore. It’s helped Brigadier Kinlan’s Brigade in the fight stay in North Africa, though I’m afraid those stores are wearing thin. But they did have a couple dozen Hellfires.” He looked at MacRae now. “I took the liberty of requisitioning them. Our X-3s can make good use of them. We have six each of the AGM-114s, M and N series, and a dozen Romeos.”

Tovey had no idea what those were, but the name Hellfire certainly sounded good to his ear. “I presume they are every bit as deadly as your other rockets,” he said.

“These are short range missiles, up to 8,000 meters range, but they were developed to take out armored targets, bunkers, hard positions. The bunker busters can put a hundred pounds of blast fragmentation incendiary punch on any target we hit, and believe me, we won’t miss. There’s also a thermobaric round for tough bunkers that will literally suck the oxygen right out of the air—a nasty little Hellfire, that one. The Romeos have multi-function warheads, depending on the job.”

“Aye,” said MacRae. “Between the Hellfires and our deck gun, we can certainly raise a little hell. So all the men you’ve assigned to engage those targets can stay home.”

“Excellent,” said Tovey. “Just what we were hoping. Can we count on your support?”

“You’ve got it,” said Elena.

“Thank you, Miss Fairchild, we are much in your debt. And considering that, I think I can make a little repayment, if you’d be so kind as to have a moment with me later. I’ve some news to convey.”

* * *

“You may not know all the details,” said Tovey later when he had that moment alone with Miss Fairchild. “But I owe my life and breath here now to Admiral Volsky. Jerry got lucky, and put a nice fat round smack on the conning tower, only we got lucky too, at least for a while. You see, that round penetrated, but didn’t explode immediately. This happens more often than you might think. Well, it put me down for the count. Had I been farther forward on the bridge, I wouldn’t be here now. Admiral Volsky dragged me to safety, into the ready room off that bridge, and closed the hatch there, putting another good wall of steel between me and what happened next. Then he took the wheel, and somehow managed to steer *Invincible* to safe water.”

“I see,” said Elena. “Yes, he certainly wasn’t the boogie man I first thought him to be.”

“Not at all. A good many men on my ship owe him their lives. Unfortunately, that round did go off, and there was no way he could have survived the resulting explosion. What remained, largely his sea jacket and blazer, were given to me... and something else.”

Now Tovey reached into his coat pocket, producing the key he had found in the hidden pocket within Volsky’s coat. Elena’s eyes widened.

“It was given to the Admiral by Mister Fedorov, or so I was told by Volsky himself. In fact, he delivered it to me. When I fell after that hit, the Admiral must have taken it again for safekeeping, unsure of what my fate might be.”

“It was sent by Fedorov? From the ship that arrived in July?”

“Presumably.”

“Well I don’t understand. How could that man have come by it? This doesn’t make sense.”

Yes, thought Tovey, that was quite the question. If Fedorov knew of the importance of this key, then he had to be the same young, enterprising man he had already met, the man who sailed with them in the Med, the man who

met Churchill after rescuing O'Connor in the desert. Yet that man vanished when *Kirov* disappeared, did he not? How was it that he now appears on this new ship arriving July 28th? Volsky was clearly different, unknowing, a man made new.... But not Fedorov. How was this possible? He shared all this with Miss Fairchild.

"This business is all twisted about like a good pretzel," said Elena. "Could there be two Fedorovs? We already know we have one Doppelganger in the two Karpovs."

"Madame, I am the last man who could come up with an answer to that. Drill me on gun laying for a good 16-inch battery in sea state 4 and I'll do a good deal better."

"I understand."

"Well... here it is. I've had a good look at it. This one doesn't seem to have any of those numbers engraved on the shaft."

That got Elena's attention. "You're certain?"

"Have a look yourself." He handed her the key, and she leaned under the nearby lamp to squint at it.

"Nothing I can see. Well... How very interesting. Mine has a serial number, and it is associated with specific geographic coordinates. Professor Dorland claimed he had a good look at the key we lost on *Rodney*, and it had coordinates for Saint Michael's Cave, Gibraltar. So we know there are time rifts at those locations... But this one..."

"Seems to lead nowhere," said Tovey.

"May I keep this?"

"Be my guest. I have no idea what I would do with it, only that Mister Fedorov was very keen to have it delivered here. Now, after a good long delay and a great deal of mischief and misery, that has been done. Have you any idea what this is all about?"

"The rifts," said Elena, "physical deformities in the spacetime continuum. You heard Dorland trying to explain it. Well, he was correct. Something did happen, many years ago, and it had a very severe impact on time. Think of it like a ball batted against a pane of glass, or a mirror. The damage causes a web of cracks, but the mirror itself doesn't shatter. We believe these keys are all associated with the end points of one of those cracks, and now I know how many we have to worry about."

"How many? You mean there are more of these keys beyond those we

discussed?”

“Indeed. We now possess two, but there are at least seven. Another went down with the *Rodney*, and this Professor Dorland is keen to find it again. He has some scheme, but we’ve heard nothing from the man since that last meeting in the Azores when he scared me half to death.”

“You mean all that talk of a grand finality.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

“Well that makes three... then there are four more missing keys?”

“We know about one of those—the Watch knew. It was supposedly assigned to an agent for a special mission. Often times the right hand knows not what the left hand is doing in this secret little group. I knew it existed, but that’s all I can say about it. As for the other three... We received information as to the location of yet another key—don’t ask me how. Thinking we had it safely in hand, we were soon very disappointed. It was supposedly in the British museum as well.”

“The British Museum?”

“Quite so. Just as the key on *Rodney* was embedded in the Selene Horse, so this one was supposed to be hidden with another artifact there in the museum.”

“Pray tell...”

“I suppose you ought to know... It was the Rosetta Stone.”

“Interesting... And might it be associated with a location?”

“Possibly, but we’ve never laid eyes on it.”

“I don’t understand. You mean you’ve left it there in the stone?”

“Something a little more complicated. As you may know, that stone was recovered damaged. A good chunk of the top was missing. That still left enough of the engraved text for it to be deciphered, but we now believe the key may be hidden within the piece that is missing.”

Tovey tapped his fingers on the table, thinking. “My dear woman... I’m rather fond of that museum. In fact I last visited just before the war and saw the Rosetta Stone at that time. It was in very good condition, perfectly intact—oh a little chip here or there, but no major damage to speak of.”

Now it was Elena’s turn to be taken by unexpected news. “Undamaged? The top third was intact?”

Tovey nodded. Watching her eyes move back and forth as though following her wild inner thoughts. He could see that this was a complete

revelation to her, something entirely unexpected.

“Of course!” she said, her breath coming quickly. “This is an altered reality—a different Meridian as Dorland would put it. The Rosetta Stone we had access to after learning about this was in our time.”

“I’m not quite sure I follow you.”

“Well then,” she said. “In the history I know, your favorite battleship, HMS *Invincible*, was never built. The Germans never took Gibraltar, there was no battle for the Canary Islands, Russia was never fragmented as it is here, Moscow never fell to the Germans, and there was no Orenburg Federation. Furthermore, Krakatoa never erupted in 1942, that occurred several decades earlier. Don’t you see? From my perspective, this world is an alternate time line.” The realization was a glow on her face now. “Why, it never occurred to me that the Rosetta Stone would be in any way different from the one I could look at in my time. But here you say it’s complete and whole? That means we might have yet another key, safe and sound, right there in the museum!”

“My,” said Tovey. “This is getting darker and more mysterious every time we discuss it, and more frightening every time I contemplate what doors these keys might open, and where they might lead. There’s a real darkness there, real uncertainty. Don’t you feel it?”

“Of course. Though I don’t fear them because the keys might open them. No. I think these keys were men to keep them sealed shut, locked and well hidden. Because once we do open one, there’s no guarantee that we can close it again.”

“Pandora’s box,” said Tovey. “Someone engineered these keys, knowing full well the locations of these cracks in the mirror, and where they might lead. They obviously knew enough to lead you here with that one around your neck, and to think I was somehow involved in that is rather unsettling. Then they hid these others in artifacts that all seemed to find their way to the British Museum—at least two of them. I wonder why?”

“Three. The other key I mentioned, the one given to another agent of the Watch, is also associated with a location, and it was in the British Museum library, hidden in the cover of the Lindisfarne Gospels.”

“How very interesting. Where does it lead us?”

“That I do not know. I wish they had told me everything.”

“Well, might we now assume that the remaining keys are also hidden in

artifacts within that museum?” Tovey walked to the end of the hall in that drafty corridor of thought.

“We might assume that, but confiscating and inspecting everything in that museum would be difficult. Now that I know the Rosetta Stone is there intact, it’s imperative I get to that key somehow. It looks like that box brought my ship here for more than one good reason.”

“I understand,” said Tovey. “Here we have two keys in hand, and we know of two more—one in the hand of an unknown agent of the Watch, whoever that may be, and one possibly still in the British Museum, in the Rosetta Stone. That leaves three more completely unaccounted for. How, may I ask, are you certain there were only seven?”

Elena smiled. “Remember that box I told you and the professor about in our last meeting?”

“Ah yes, the box that contained a scroll with my name on it—a little message, just for you.”

“Yes, the box we found at Delphi. The box that brought this ship here to the 1940s, ostensibly to find keys that could only be located on this time line.... Well... I went over it with a fine toothed comb, and a good magnifying glass. Come to find out—it has a hidden drawer. She got up, and to Tovey’s amazement, revealed the hidden compartment behind the moveable bulkhead, where the Red Phone was safely installed. There, sitting beside the telephone, was the box, and touching it she shortly revealed a small hidden drawer.

“Have a look for yourself,” said Elena, a gleam in her eye.

“My,” said Tovey. “One for each key...” He was looking at a series of small imprints in the material making up the base of that drawer. There were seven, each depression in the shape of a key.

“My key fits very nicely here,” Elena pointed to the second recessed area. “I thought it might be in the number one position, but it only fits here, in the number two spot. I suspect all the others have a place here as well.”

“Why not see where our newest arrival fits in,” Tovey suggested.

Elena smiled. “Yes, why not?”

Part XI

Presentiment

*“Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn
Indicative that suns go down;
The notice to the startled grass
That darkness is about to pass.”*

— Emily Dickenson

Chapter 31

Admiral Kurita had every reason to believe he would soon be returning to the South Pacific. After all, the Siberians had no navy to speak of, and surely all these rumors about a demon ship, *Mizuchi*, were exaggerated. Yet, when Yamamoto had selected him for command here, the senior Admiral had given him a foreboding warning.

“What I will tell you now is known only to a very few,” he said. “*Hiryu* was not sunk as a result of damage sustained in the Pearl Harbor attack. It was sunk by the Siberians.”

“The Siberians? How is that possible? They have no navy. Was it a submarine?”

“A rocket attack—fired from a ship we have yet to set eyes upon. This is the same ship that damaged *Mutsu* and *Chikuma*, and when you get to the Home Islands, I order you to personally inspect the damage put on those ships.”

“I do not understand. A rocket attack? Then the rumors flying about the fleet are true? *Mizuchi* is real?”

“Very true, and very real, though I do not encourage fear mongering. We do not know how they came to possess such a ship, but the fact that it exists is enough.” Yamamoto would, of course, never reveal the whole truth concerning the existence of that ship, for he could still scarcely believe it himself. “Its primary weaponry is rocketry, and they are fast, lethal, and have a very long range. They can strike your ships from well beyond the range of your battleships’ biggest guns, and well over the horizon—and from what we have seen, these rockets have deadly accuracy—they never miss their targets.”

That was very sobering talk, particularly when coming from the Fleet Admiral, and Kurita took a moment to let it settle. Then he set his jaw, determined. “What are my orders?” he asked.

“First do as I have instructed. See the damage on *Mutsu*. You are being promoted from 7th Cruiser Division to commander of the 1st Battleship Division. That division will now be composed of our two newest ships, *Satsuma* and *Hiraga*. They are presently at Urajio, but will move to Sapporo

as the heart of the close escort force for the 7th Division troop transports. Those troops are going to Karafuto to deal with the Siberians that have landed on the northern end of that island. Adequate cruisers and destroyers will be added to support this mission.”

“It should pose no difficulties.”

“Unless *Mizuchi* appears. You must be very diligent. Scout well, and to aid that effort, I am attaching a very special ship to your task force, the cruiser *Takami*.”

Kurita inclined his head. “I know most every cruiser in the fleet, Admiral, but I have not yet heard of this one.”

“That is because it is a very secret ship, something entirely new. Do not think that the Siberians and Russians are the only ones who have developed this new rocket technology....”

“I see. This *Takami* also has such weapons?”

“It does, though it was designed as a fleet defense ship. Most of its rockets are meant to be used against enemy aircraft, or against the rocket weapons this *Mizuchi* flings against your ships.”

“Ah! Then it can shoot down the enemy rockets?”

“This is what we hope. But Kurita, this is very secret. It will be the first time *Takami* enters combat, the first real test of its capabilities. Nothing is to be said about this ship. Understand? It will operate well ahead of your fleet, beyond your forward horizon. Keep it there, and do not interfere with its operations. You will receive encrypted communication via the special radio set that has been transported to your flagship. A member of *Takami*’s crew will operate that equipment, and report directly to you. Coordinate carefully with *Takami*. It is commanded by a Captain Harada, and I ask you to heed his experience and judgment. He is specially trained in the use of these new weapons.”

“Another secret project,” said Kurita. “A pity this ship was not with you in the Koro Sea...” Kurita realized he probably should not have said that, but Yamamoto raised a hand, as if to say all was well.

“That was my responsibility—my fault. Hara fought well, but we should not be surprised that the American Navy fares better than its Army did on the Philippines. There they were taken by complete surprise, yet they endured four months, unlike the British in Hong Kong and Singapore, or the hapless Dutch colonies. Do not underestimate the Americans—they will be our

fiercest and most capable opponent in this war, and each and every battle holds the possibility that we will lose good men, planes, and even ships. Last December, when we sailed for Pearl Harbor, we had six fleet carriers, six more light carriers, and the two scout carriers. We lost both of those in the Gilberts, and now we have lost half our fleet carriers and a third of our light carriers. This is war, but thankfully, we have also done much harm to the enemy. We destroyed their battleships at Pearl Harbor, for what they were worth, and we have also sunk at least four of their best fleet carriers.”

“Speaking of that,” said Kurita, “will I have naval air cover for this mission, or rely on our land based aircraft?”

“Both. Admiral Kakuta is being given command of the 2nd Carrier Division—*Kaga* and *Tosa*. Between those two you will have 150 naval aircraft, and at least three more squadrons operating from airfields on Hokkaido. Think of this *Mizuchi* as if it were an enemy aircraft carrier, not a battleship. Consider its rocket weapons as determined pilots—so dedicated to bringing harm to their enemies that they would pilot their planes directly into your ship to be certain they scored a hit. That is what you will be facing. Hopefully, our new fleet defense cruiser *Takami* will prove its worth, but you must also be prepared to strike the enemy in any way you can.”

“I promise you I will find this demon, and slay it.”

“I would never doubt your skill or heart for battle, but be cautious, Kurita, be very cautious. You must allow *Takami* to take a position in the vanguard of your fleet. It has advanced radar systems that can find the enemy for you, and scout aircraft as well. I have also spoken to Vice Admiral Kakuta and ordered him to keep his carriers well behind your main covering force with the cruisers and battleships. That is your second mission—protect those two carriers! The loss of *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* dealt us a very hard blow. We must preserve all the fleet carriers that remain, and thankfully, *Tosa* is now ready for operations with *Kaga*. Remember what I have told you. *Hiryu* was struck by just one of these deadly enemy rockets, and it set off all the ready ammo, fuel, and combat loaded planes in the hanger deck. The fires were terrible. Remember that.”

“Do not worry, Admiral, our pilots are every bit as capable as those rockets may be.”

“That may be so, but this *Mizuchi* also has smaller rockets designed to shoot down our aircraft. That was why there was no air cover over

Kazantochi when the Siberians surprised us there. Again, all of this is my fault. I was so preoccupied with our operations in the south that I overlooked the threat in the north. That will not happen again, which is why I now send you, our most promising and dedicated Admiral. Fight well, Kurita, but use your head.”

“You can rely on me, Admiral.”

“Good... One thing I have told Kakuta is that he must disperse his strike wave into individual *Shotai*. No more than three planes must be in close formation, and even they are to disperse at the first sign of enemy rocket fire.” This was something Lieutenant Commander Fukada had tried to impress upon Yamamoto, and he passed the lesson on. “Another thing,” Yamamoto continued. “*Takami* must first do all it can to stop the enemy rocket attacks aimed at your fleet. That is why it stands in the vanguard. Kakuta’s carriers should only strike after the signal to do so is received from *Takami*.”

“And what if we were to lose that ship?”

“Then you must use your best judgment in deciding how to proceed, but do as I have ordered and walk the decks of *Mutsu*. Preserve those fleet carriers, and also realize that, while you will command our two newest battleships, *Mutsu* did not suffer that damage simply because it was old. After considering that, if you can kill this demon, you will do the Emperor, and your nation, a very great service.”

Kurita bowed, a gleam in his eye, and was soon on his way.

* * *

DDG-180 embarked on the long voyage north with Kurita’s cruiser squadron, while the outcome of Operation FS was being decided in that hot carrier duel in the south. Fukada had been restless the whole time. He had been unhappy with Yamamoto’s decision to send the ship north. In spite of the fact that the history was already quite different, the battle in the south, was one he could at least grasp and easily understand. While Operation FS had actually been planned before it was eventually cancelled in the history he knew, the situation in the north was entirely different. It was a history that had never happened, and there was no safe harbor for his thinking and planning, no way to understand what was really going on—at least not in

terms of the Second World War.

“Face it,” said Harada. “We have to look at this situation as if it were happening in our own time now. We’ve drilled maneuvers in the Sea of Japan for decades. The Bear was always our presumed adversary, along with China. So this is going to be a simple fleet defense operation. That’s the only way we can look at it.”

“It’s going to be dangerous,” said Fukada. “We’ve gamed out maneuvers against the Red Banner Pacific Fleet, but that was when their toughest capital ship was an old *Slava* class cruiser—and we always had the American 7th Fleet watching our backs.”

“Having a few regrets now about the side we picked in this fight?” asked Harada. Sure, it was always reassuring to know the US fleet was out there with us, but not this time. We’ve got to internalize this another way. Assume it’s 2021. The 7th Fleet is mustering near Guam and intending to intervene in the Taiwan thing. We’re left up here and get word the Russians have crossed the demarcation line on Sakhalin. *Takami* is ordered north to accompany a couple of our helo carriers and show the flag. We’ve converted them to light strike capable carriers with the F-35s aboard, again, thanks to our old American friends.”

“Don’t rub it in,” said Fukada. “Alright, the one common denominator in both situations is the incontrovertible fact that Russia is our adversary. This time they mean business, and there’s a *Kirov* class battlecruiser in the Sea of Okhotsk supporting their Air/Sea reinforcement of Sakhalin. We’re to support Kurita’s task force, which will include two carriers, and assure the transport of two regiments to Sakhalin.”

“That’s job one,” said Harada. “And I think we can handle that easily enough, unless *Kirov* intervenes directly. Then we’ve got a real fight on our hands. My advice is that we ask Kurita to play a defensive role here, but suppose he decides to get more offensive minded?”

Fukada shrugged. “Those two carriers won’t have much real offensive punch against a ship like *Kirov*,” he said. “If they could get through their SAM defenses, then yes, they could deliver 250 KG bombs that would hurt that ship easily enough. But they won’t get through. You and I both know that.”

“And we haven’t the SSM inventory to put any real pressure on *Kirov*’s SAM umbrella. Our eight Type 12 Anti-Ship Missiles would all have to be

fired in a big salvo to have any chance of even one getting through, and that is a slim chance at best. Could we time a salvo like that to coincide with a strike from those two carriers?”

“We might, but remember, *Kirov* is packing S-300s. They can engage any formation of carrier aircraft well before they ever have a chance to close on the target. Those men won’t know what hit them. I stressed this with Yamamoto, and asked him to order the pilots to fly widely dispersed patterns on approach.”

“Can’t we counter those S-300s?”

“We’d have to use the SM-3s. Face it, the Russian missile tech is second to none. That S-300 is damn fast. Later versions can get to 5000 meters per second velocity, and that is well beyond the capability of even a missile like the Patriot for an interception. Perhaps our only solace will be the fact that they will have that missile in limited numbers, but even their mid range SAMs can fire out at least 80 kilometers. They’ll fire in large salvos, and we won’t be able to stop them. Our best bet is to use our own SAMs to stop any SSMs they direct against our ship or the carriers we’re defending. Their P-900s will be easy to catch—they’re subsonic until terminal mode. The Moskit IIs only haul at Mach 3, and we should handle them as well.”

“So we play defense for those carriers against the SSMs,” said Harada. “But we can’t really help them get through *Kirov*’s SAM defense, not unless we throw every SSM we have at them at just the right time.”

“It will be difficult to predict that outcome,” said Fukada. “But if we do go offensive, I’d use our Type 12s against other shipping. That’s what they were originally conceived for. Our 5th Anti-Ship Missile Regiment at Kumato was going to use them to target Russian Amphibious vessels.”

“That means we’d have to be within 120 Klicks of the target. Getting that far north with *Takami* could be a problem. They won’t be landing down south.”

“No argument there,” said Fukada. “And we won’t want our carriers up that far either. My thought was that we could take this loaf in slices. Stand east of Korsakov for phase one operations. That will put us in a good position to interdict any move the Russians make towards our reinforcement operation.”

“What about the carriers?”

Fukada shook his head. “Frankly, we’d be better off on our own. If Kurita

moves up there with us his carriers will just be a magnet for Russian missiles. We won't attract too much attention alone if we stay passive on the electronics. We lie in wait..." Fukada had a strange look on his face, as if he was trying to see the battle that was coming. "They won't expect us here, and they'll likely be radiating like there's no tomorrow. Otani will pick them up, and then we get a very brief window to decide what to do. What we need is for someone to wiggle a left jab in their face. Then we hit them with a good right cross—all eight Type 12 missiles—all or nothing."

"So you've changed your tune about using them against the transports."

"You were right—we'd never get that far north without being detected and challenged, and we don't want Kurita up there."

"Who wiggles the jab?"

"We have to have some air power in lower Sakhalin. Once we locate *Kirov*, we vector them in. A nice little bomber strike would be enough to fix their attention west toward the island. Then we launch all eight Type 12s in sea skimmer mode. I just wish the damn things were faster. The Type 12 runs just a whisker below the speed of sound. If we fire at anywhere near our maximum range, and we'll want to, then we're looking at five minutes to target on those missiles."

"Right.... And the Russian Moskit IIs move at Mach Three. So while we're sitting here looking at our watches and waiting out those five minutes...."

"I get the picture, but I don't see any other option. Five minutes sounds like an eternity when the other fellow can throw back something that fast. Who knows, maybe they'll get stupid and counter with their P-900s."

"Don't bet on that," said Harada. "This Karpov knows what he's doing. No. All we have going for us if we attack is those few minutes of shock and uncertainty. They won't know what's coming at them, unless they have some kind of wizard on their sensor suite. So I'm betting on that little interval of confusion while they try and convince themselves that the Japanese of 1942 suddenly have a near speed of sound missile." The Captain shrugged, his arms folded, thinking. "All or nothing. We let that punch fly and see if we get lucky."

Fukada nodded. The great risk they were taking here was very apparent to him now, but even as he felt this, another idea occurred to him, though he said nothing about it to Harada. All or nothing...

Chapter 32

It was an odd place for a crucial turning point in the war to be found, and few who worked there knew that the project they were now undertaking would become one of the most secret and most significant of the entire war. There, at the new Applied Physics Laboratory of Washington's Carnegie Institution, a team of scientists and civilian workers were attempting to solve a frustrating problem for the military—how to defeat enemy aircraft.

Since the end of WWI, the modern aircraft had been the bane of military defense planners and the chosen method of first strike on offense. Swarms of bombers, dive bombers, and fighters would lead any major assault on land. For the Navy, the hard lesson that control of the sea depended on control of the skies above that sea was taught over and over, from Pearl Harbor to the carrier duels that preceded the struggle for vital Pacific island outposts. It was the aircraft that was the true King of the battle space, not the lumbering battleships, and the value of a carrier rested solely in the fact that it could bring those aircraft to the fight.

For the last year there had been rumors throughout the US defense establishment of a new weapon that now threatened to upset the long steel reign of the military aircraft. Though the British had been very closed mouthed with intelligence on the matter, word had leaked through about the efficacy of rockets as an AA weapon.

Up until that time, rocketry was an arcane science, the province of physicists and engineers like Robert Goddard in the United States, who built liquid fueled rockets as early as 1926, achieving 34 successful launches before America's war began in late 1941. Like Germany's Wernher von Braun, Goddard was a true pioneer in the development of rocket technology. As a young boy Goddard had first dreamed of designing a device that could take humanity into space, as far away as Mars, all in the muse of his young 17 year old mind while he was staring at the skies from the top of a cherry tree in 1899. He called it the moment of his first great inspiration, and celebrated it every year as a kind of anniversary on October 19th.

So when rumors began to fly that the British had a rocket weapon that could track and hit a speedy flying aircraft, the matter eventually found its

way to Goddard's design table. In Fedorov's history, the Army had not come calling on physicists and aeronautical engineers until 17 August, 1944, when they issued a memorandum asking for a radar guided missile that could shoot down enemy strategic bombers. Bell Labs would take up the challenge, which would soon become the Nike Ajax Rocket project, but it would be seven long years before the first successful interception of a drone occurred in 1951.

The little demonstration witnessed by Admiral Yamamoto in Davao Bay was therefore quite ground breaking, and did much to shock him into embracing these two strange officers that had come to him, seemingly out of nowhere. Now he had sent these men, and their amazing ship, off to defend his northern fleet against the demonic powers of yet another interloper with awesome new weapons of war, the ship they called *Mizuchi*.

Rocketry was already plying its deadly craft, right there in the 1940s, in both the Atlantic and Pacific. Despite that fact, little was really known about the ships that used these weapons, and what was known was kept in the closely guarded circles of military intelligence organizations. Even as work began on this idea of hitting an aircraft with a rocket, the technical challenges were seen to be truly daunting. First they needed a stable and effective rocket, reliable and consistent performance, an engine that could propel it to desired altitudes, and a means of tracking and guiding it to the target. While history would record that all these challenges would be overcome, it would take time to accomplish that, and enormous resources.

While all this was going on, that frustrating problem of how to defend against enemy aircraft continued to be a sore thumb on the mailed fist of all armed services. Some argued that the best and only defense was yet another aircraft, but others looked for ways to improve the existing 'low-tech' defense approach being used—the venerable anti-aircraft gun. A man named Merle Anthony Tuve was another of those brainy PhDs tinkering at the edge of technologies that would soon combine to become lethal weapons of war.

He was exploring the use of radio waves to measure the height of the atmosphere, and it soon became apparent that radio waves could be used to measure other things as well. The fledgling technology that came to be known as 'Radar' would be one thing that emerged from that observation. One day, considering the problem of those bothersome aircraft, Tuve theorized that AA guns might be made much more effective if their shells

could 'see' enemy planes. The way to give them those eyes would lie in his tinkering with radio waves, but his colleagues thought it would be too difficult to try and mount delicate radar technology on something subject to violent forces like an AA gun shell.

"No," said Tuve. "Just use the radar as an early warning system on the ground, or something to help the gun get pointed in the right direction. What I'm talking about is just something that can tell the shell its target is near. You know, those shells have quite a blast radius for fragmentation shrapnel when they explode, but right now, they only do so on contact. Most AA shells just fly right past a target unless they score a direct hit, or explode at the fixed altitude set by their fuse. What I'm talking about is a kind of proximity fuse that can set off that shell when it gets anywhere near an enemy plane."

Tuve became the founding director of the Applied Physics Laboratory, now at John Hopkins University, and there he set about to develop his idea, much to the delight of the Army. It took as many as 25,000 rounds fired from an AA gun for each hit obtained when Tuve started his project. During the Battle of Britain, the British estimated they fired an average of 18,500 rounds at German aircraft for each one they actually destroyed. When Tuve finished, he had cut that down to between 30 and 60 rounds, and this would improve as the war progressed. That was a staggering leap forward in the precision and effectiveness of AA guns, and it would become one of the most closely guarded technologies of the US war effort, as secret as the Manhattan Project, and in many ways more significant in its impact on the war effort in general.

Both the British and Germans had looked at the idea in 1940, but deemed it impossible to achieve. Tuve proved them wrong. What the team created was a miniature radio device that could simply bounce radio waves off any target it was approaching. Well before the development of the transistor, radios of that day all relied on very fragile vacuum tubes. How in the world would the team fit a glass tube into an artillery shell, and have it survive the violence of being fired from a gun?

The answer would come from another man, Dr. James Van Allen at the University of Iowa. He met Merle Tuve at the Carnegie Institute, and became a member of the National Defense Research Committee, the same group that would spawn the Manhattan Project. Van Allen had been working on creating more durable vacuum tubes for special rugged duty. He had learned that a

small company was also involved with miniaturizing the tubes so they could fit inside a hearing aid. Those two attributes, ruggedness and miniaturization, would become key factors in the successful design of Tuve's radio proximity fuse.

Materials were found to shield and cushion the glass, prevent the fragile tungsten elements inside the tubes from being damaged, and allow the vacuum tube to survive the shock of being fired from a gun—20,000 G-forces. Van Allen's solutions helped the team deliver its first shock-proof tube by January of 1942 in Fedorov's history. But the question of how to advance this technology had come earlier in these Altered States, another odd effect of *Kirov's* influence on events. It was June of 1941 when the first fuses were tested here, and six months later, as many as 5000 proximity fuses had been produced and installed in AA gun rounds. That was largely due to Tuve's tremendous organizational ability, and the team he coordinated to solve the problem. He believed in Napoleon's first principle of war: "I can make up for lost ground, but never lost time."

So Tuve insisted his personnel forget about saving money or resources, and focused entirely on saving time. It didn't have to be perfect, it just had to get done, and before the enemy developed the same thing. "The best job in the world is a total failure if it is too late," he said, "We don't need the best possible unit, but we damn well want the first one." Tuve insisted on speed in every aspect of the development process, but still achieved a 97% quality control rate on the overall system. Everything needed, the radio transmitter, antenna, tubes, battery detonation switches and safety measures, all had to fit into a tube no more than 1.5 inches wide and 8 inches long, and with a shelf life for storage in the shells of up to three years or more.

It would later be learned that the Germans had employed at least 50 small project groups to try and solve the same problem, but believed it would not be achieved in time to matter in the war. Tuve proved them all wrong. His small initial team would soon burgeon into massive production centers producing 40,000 rounds per day. Over 22 million would be produced in the war before it ended.

Naturally, the Navy was very interested in the idea of a much more accurate AA gun to protect its ships. The gun that would fire them was the QF 5-inch dual purpose gun mounted on ships from destroyer class up to battleships and carriers. The technology increased AA accuracy by an order

of magnitude, one day achieving 90% kill rates on V-1 Buzz Bombs with only ten rounds fired. It was going to be so significant, that it would spell the doom of Japanese naval and land based air power as an effective strike weapon of war. The Japanese would eventually learn the trick themselves, but too late in the war to really matter.

They did not know it at the time, but the fruits of Tuve's project, the effort of over 80,000 men and women, had already produced proximity fuse rounds for the U.S. Navy to make surface ships much harder targets for naval strike craft. The first ships to be fully equipped with the new rounds were already at sea, and had already fired them at the planes and pilots of Hara's Carrier Division 5.

During that battle, Halsey had ordered Fletcher's battleship squadron to make a run at the Japanese positions around Nandi, particularly the airfield they had captured there. Two ships in that squadron had the new special proximity fused AA shells for their 5-inch guns, the USS *South Dakota*, and the light AA cruiser *Atlanta*. They would now report back that the new rounds were a tremendous success. *South Dakota* had taken down four enemy planes for the expense of only 42 of the new rounds. Without them they might have had to fire close to 500.

The new proximity fused shells had arrived six months earlier than they did in the unaltered history, when the cruiser *Helena* was the first to receive them in November of 1942. The use of the shell itself, and even its existence, was still to be considered a closely guarded secret. They could only be fired in situations where the military believed it would be impossible for the enemy to ever recover a dud or misfired shell to learn its secret. This was why all those 5-inch guns now carried two types of rounds, one for use against other naval targets or in shore bombardment, and the proximity fused rounds for use against enemy aircraft.

In case the shells were ever found, or captured by the enemy, the US was already working on a special jammer that could be installed on its own bombers. It was designed to sweep the signal band used by the radio transmitter in the shells, and inhibit their ability to bounce a clear signal off the target. It worked, and that fact also contributed to the secrecy that surrounded the new shells. They could be easily jammed, and so their best defense was to prevent the enemy from ever knowing they existed.

As we have seen in this tortured history, some enemies simply knew too

much, and for them the secrets of WWII were quite literally an open book. One such man was named Ivan Volkov. One word from him could render the effort of men like Tuve, and the thousands of others supporting his project, null and void. He could tell the Germans the round existed, how and when it could be expected to be used on defense, and how it could be jammed. Beyond that, Volkov could tell the Germans their seemingly fruitless effort to develop proximity fuses of their own could produce a rich harvest if they only followed his advice and guidance. He could do this by going to Hitler with yet another sheaf of supposedly captured enemy technical documents, things he could fetch from his dangerously efficient jacket computer. Amazingly, it still worked, a testament to the efficiency of its design.

Volkov could do all of this, and if the Germans heeded his advice, they would soon have a powerful defense against one of the most devastating weapons the enemy would throw at the Third Reich—strategic bombers. And this is exactly what Ivan Volkov did.

“Do not be put off by the failure of your Luftwaffe to humble the British in 1940,” he said to Hitler in their semi-annual meeting. “Do not think the enemy bombers will have the same difficulty when they come to attack Germany.”

“Our fighters should be defense enough,” said Hitler. “We will simply sweep them from the skies.”

“In the beginning...” said Volkov with just a hint of foreboding in his tone. “Yet their bombers will grow in numbers, and soon they will have a long range fighter capable of escorting them all the way to Berlin! Your Luftwaffe will fight bravely, but it will not be enough.”

“What? You say this as though you really are a prophet. This is merely speculation.”

“But it is based on real intelligence,” said Volkov, who anticipated this line from Hitler and had a folder of diagrams of the actual enemy fighters in hand. “Look here,” he said, passing a document to Hitler. “This one they will call the ‘P-51Mustang,’ and it will have a range of over 1,600 miles, more than 2,700 kilometers. They will send these by the hundreds, not simply escorting their bombers, but sweeping the area over the intended bombing target well before the bombers get there. They will be enough, my Führer, to break your air defense. So why not build these new proximity fuse flak shells? I can also tell you how to protect them from jamming. Then, when

those enemy bombers come, the thunder of your 88s will truly shock them. I can increase your AA defense accuracy by a hundred fold. You will no longer have to fire barrages into pre-determined boxes and detonate shells by elevation.”

Hitler narrowed his eyes, looking at Volkov and then at the diagrams of the new enemy fighter. “I have learned enough about you, Volkov, to know that any time you call me ‘my Führer’ you are desperate to win your point. Very well, I see no harm in ordering these new shells produced, but the testing had better prove your claims in terms of accuracy and effectiveness. Now I have another question for you. We need information on these new enemy rocket designs. That is what I really want from you. I am told we have recently captured two such missiles while they were in the process of being tested by the enemy.”

This came as a great shock to Volkov, for he could not imagine that the Germans could have captured anything that might have come off the decks of *Kirov*. “Tell me more,” he said darkly.

“American rockets,” said Hitler with a smile, rocking slightly on his heels. “A nice little windfall—you see, you are not the only one that can get your hands on enemy secrets. My Kriegsmarine delivered a most interesting cache of equipment that was taken from an enemy ship at sea.”

“Where? What ship? What was it you found?”

Now Hitler was turning the tables on Volkov, for this time it was the Führer with all the answers, and Volkov with all the questions.

“Never mind all those irrelevant details,” said Hitler. “But since you are delivering all this new intelligence, tell your operatives they missed something—the new American X-17A. Now that we have this enemy rocket, we will take it apart, piece by piece, to see how it works. I am already told it has a most unusual warhead, and when we are done, I will build rockets of our own by the thousands, and darken the skies above our cities with them should the Allies attempt this strategic bombing you worry so much about. What do you say to that?” Hitler smiled, a twisted smile that spoke of havoc and mayhem on his mind, and for the first time in all their meetings together, Volkov was afraid.

Chapter 33

Yes, Volkov was afraid.

He knew that the Americans of this day could not have anything that might be rightfully called a functioning missile. As soon as he got safely back aboard his airship, he immediately queried the missile in his computer jacket database, and found his fears were not unwarranted. He wanted to go right back to Hitler with a thousand questions, but knew that would be impossible. Was the German leader correct—an American missile called the X-17A? Might that name or designation be mere coincidence, some code applied to an archaic weapon? Surely he could not have been referring to the X-17 missile he was now learning about. Development didn't even start on it until February of 1955!

Then again, the Moskit II wasn't developed until the early 21st Century, and it was here, the terror of enemy shipping the world over. But the X-17 wasn't an anti ship missile—it was a real ballistic missile, long and slender, and 40 feet high. The rocket had three stages, a thicker main stage at the bottom that would burn for 23 seconds to propel the rocket to an altitude of about 27 kilometers. Then it would jettison stage one, tip over at apogee, and the three rocket motors of stage two would burn for about 2 seconds to rapidly increase descent speed before that stage would be cut loose. The final third stage was just ten feet in length, a single rocket that would also burn for just under two seconds, but that was enough to increase the reentry speed to between Mach 11 and Mach 14, depending on the angle.

Volkov had to find out what this missile really was, and his man inside Peenemünde would soon provide the details, once told what to look for. It was a very dangerous mission, for security at that secret German research site was very rigorous, though insiders had a way of getting past security that would stop an outsider cold. It was another long week before he received a coded message back, and his face whitened when he learned the truth. Hitler was not making an idle boast! The Germans had two prototype missiles in their possession, one in a closely guarded steel vault, untouched, and the second in a secret laboratory where it was being slowly dismantled,

measured, analyzed and observed by a wide range of technical specialists, and some of the best minds in Germany.

So this was what those earlier reports were all about, thought Volkov. He had received intelligence that a fast armored train had arrived at Toulon, under heavy escort. Something had been delivered there by a pair of German warships, and it was then escorted north under round the clock German air cover. This had to be those very same missiles, he thought. From that point, he set his intelligence men to work on back tracking the deployment of the German ships in question. One, he learned, was the fast battlecruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and the second was that hybrid scout carrier, the *Goeben*. Neither ship had ever existed in the history he guarded within his computer data files, and now it seemed they had just delivered something that also could not exist in this day and time.

How could the Germans have gotten their hands on an American missile that wasn't even designed until 1955? He grilled his intelligence operatives to make certain that the American rocket research programs could not have produced such a missile. In the end, he looked at the deployment of those two German ships. They had broken out into the Atlantic after the big battle off Fuerteventura, and, after sparring with the British and engaging one of their convoys, they disappeared. It was weeks later before they were encountered again off the African coast, and pursued by British fast cruisers.

Volkov put the full weight of his network to the task of determining where those ships went. Then, after another two weeks of intensive spy craft, he had his answer—the deep South Atlantic. It was there that they encountered and took an American ship as a prize, which was subsequently handed off to one of their merchant commerce raiders and quietly escorted home. The real windfall was his agent in Toulon, where that prize ship had secretly been berthed. He managed to get to it just before the name and recognition number was painted over, VM1. He had also used a high-powered lens to capture the name stenciled on a life preserver: U.S.S. *Norton Sound*.

With that key information, Volkov went to work to determine what this ship was, and it was then that the anxiety within him started to become real fear. After the lesson of his own life, after the presence of *Kirov* here, and his suspicions about things the British were doing in this war that revealed an advanced level of technical capability, he should not have been surprised, but

he was. *Norton Sound* was an American ship alright, but it wasn't supposed to have even been laid down until September of that year! It would then be launched in November of 1943, and finally fitted out and commissioned in January of 1945.

He stared at the photograph his Toulon agent had managed to deliver, and it was, indeed a perfect match for the images he had of this ship in his own data. How in the world could the Germans have found this ship in the deep South Atlantic? Now he was finally asking the same question that Alan Turing had asked Peter Twinn a month earlier.... How in this world could these things happen?

Volkov suddenly had a new query to make of his data—he wanted to know all known deployments of the American ship *Norton Sound*, and soon he had what he was looking for, a correlation of that ship's presence in the South Atlantic, and very near the presumed location of the German raiders. He had determined where they had gone when his intelligence network produced a plaintive lost signal of alarm that had been sent to Royal Navy headquarters when an outpost claimed they were suddenly being bombed by German *Stukas*. That outpost was on Ascension Island.

Those planes had to come off that German scout carrier, he thought. That's where those raiders went, and somewhere in that area they encountered this American ship.... Yet the only time I can verify that the *Norton Sound* was in that region was in 1958. How is this possible, that they would find a ship that simply does not exist today, in a place it only visited one time, sixteen years from now? And just because curiosity is a way that leads on to way, Volkov soon found out what the *Norton Sound* was actually doing there in 1958. It was out on a secret test mission, Project Argus, and that was when all the pieces of the puzzle suddenly clicked in his mind—Argus, *Norton Sound*, X-17A missiles.

That was when the thump of anxiety in his chest became real fear, the clammy cold sweat of uncertainty on the back of his neck, and a worried expression on his face. That project was designed to launch a small atomic warhead into outer space. Then something struck him like a thunderclap—those reports of strange auroras over the Azores. He had dismissed it as nothing more than an odd weather event at the time, but now, when he looked at the date of that event, he saw it occurred very near the time of the German attack on Ascension Island. Could the two events be related?

Reading further on the American Argus project, he soon learned that the Azores was a special location where those exact effects in the upper atmosphere were expected to occur. The Americans even positioned ships there to observe it! Yet could that ship be the same one that took part in those tests? Volkov suddenly had a very grim feeling. He knew, from his own time, that his government had been tinkering with the odd aftereffects of nuclear detonations, and that they learned some most interesting things about them. My god, he thought to himself. Could it have happened here? Was this a displacement event? The yield on that American warhead was very small, and it would have been detonated very high, far from the ship that launched it. And yet... The *Norton Sound* was here. If this impossible series of dots actually do connect to paint the picture I'm seeing now... *then Hitler has the bomb!*

The Führer's words were now riveted in his mind: "...we will take it apart, piece by piece, to see how it works. I am already told it has a most unusual warhead, and when we are done, I will build rockets of our own by the thousands..."

* * *

A Captain never forgets a ship he once commanded, and Vice Admiral Kurita was no different. When he returned to *Mogami*, flagship of his old 7th Cruiser Division, he knew it would be his last cruise on that ship, and there was a brief moment of nostalgia that passed over him. Then, the realization of what he was now embarking on swept that emotion away. He was receiving a most important assignment, command of the Northern fleet that would include two fast battleships and a pair of fleet carriers. This was a promotion of great significance, and he was deeply honored that Admiral Yamamoto would entrust this mission to him.

So I must not fail, he thought. Strange that I have no knowledge of this secret ship, particularly since it is a cruiser. *Takami*... I have half a mind to make speed and go see what this is all about, but my place is here with the division. We sail north now to rendezvous with all the other elements of the northern fleet. *Kaga* and *Tosa* will be off Sapporo on the 18th, awaiting our arrival. Battleships *Hiraga* and *Satsuma* are already waiting there. It is a very long way from Rabaul to Sapporo, at least 3500 nautical miles. We should still arrive right on schedule if we make a consistent 20 knots. While I am

tempted to remain here with *Mogami*, I think it more appropriate that I set my flag on one of the battleships. *Hiraga* was the first ship in its class, and so the honor must rightfully go there.

He thought of that ship now, Japan's most modern fast battleship. It was not as big and powerful as *Yamato*, but at 42,000 tons it was a true heavyweight. *Ise* and *Hyuga* weighed as much, but they were old and slow, and had only 14-inch guns. *Hiraga* and *Satsuma* had the new 16-inch guns, in three triple turrets, which was a departure from designs where the main battery was often spread over four turrets. *Yamato* and *Musashi* had that same design, for it saved the considerable weight of that fourth turret and barbette. And *Hiraga* was fast at 30 knots, the fastest battleship in the fleet, and with more endurance than the long legged *Kongo* class battlecruisers. It was designed to run with our carriers, he knew, and that is exactly what I will do with it.

Yamamoto was quite clear about the need to protect those carriers. He does not want them exposed to enemy attack. If this *Mizuchi* is real, and dares to challenge us, how should I proceed. I am told this secret new fleet defense ship scouting ahead of the task force will give the signal for attack, and determine where the enemy is. Can it really do what Yamamoto believes? How is it I heard nothing of the development of these powerful new naval rockets over all these years? Secrecy is one thing. We took considerable measures to conceal the construction of the *Yamato* class battleships from prying eyes, but I always knew about them. This *Takami*, however, is a fish that has slipped out of the net.

Strange that Yamamoto insisted I communicate with that ship only by means of the special radio equipment we are carrying now. This new officer is very stoic, a Lieutenant Kobayashi. He certainly seems one to discharge his duties in a diligent manner, but there is something... different about him. I cannot put my finger on it, but he has an awareness about him, clear minded, intelligent and respectful when he reports, but also strangely forgetful of the most common things aboard ship. He never uses the voice tubes, seems to hunt for switches and dials, unless he is sitting in front of that new radio, a most unusual piece of equipment.

It does not transmit normal coded signals, and all traffic is conducted in the clear via voice communications. I am told that the signal is scrambled and encrypted, but does that not allow the enemy to triangulate on the position of

that ship, *Takami*, and my flagship as well? The Lieutenant has explained that the equipment transmits very short bursts at a high rate of speed on many rotated channels and frequencies to prevent this. He calls it frequency hopping, and says the antenna being used is designed to focus the communication in only one direction. I asked him how his own ship could possibly know which frequencies to listen for this message, and he tells me the very first information sent establishes all that. Both radios agree where to have tea—how very interesting. Yet who can say what the enemy might be capable of?

* * *

Who knew?

Lieutenant Kobayashi would not be expecting anyone in the Allied navies of 1942 to be able to intercept and decrypt the messages he was transmitting back to *Takami*, but he was forgetting that there were men from the 21st Century sailing these waters, and on the enemy side. Some of them had very good ears, and a nose for all the typical methods and procedures used to mask protected signals traffic at sea.

One such man was Lieutenant Isaak Nikolin, the man who loved to play at riddles on his own internal encrypted network, direct to his good friend Tasarov at the Sonar station without anyone on the ship knowing. This time the riddle Nikolin was trying to solve was external, out there on the dark unseen airwaves his systems were routinely sifting through at his communications station aboard *Kirov*. He hadn't expected to get a SIG-Alert here. If the ship had been on its planned appointed rounds in the year 2021, then yes, this traffic would be normal, but not here.

He didn't get any clean message intercept, but the system simply reported that it had detected high speed traffic, on a multi-band transmission with a wide range of frequency variation. That should not have been happening there in 1942, and it was enough to make him put down his crossword puzzle, and take a closer look. He wanted to make sure he wasn't just seeing a minor systems glitch, but the more he looked into it, the more concerned he was, and perplexed as well. It appeared as if someone was sending encrypted radio traffic, and using some very modern technology to mask the point of origin and signal bearing.

He decided to get curious, and set up a dedicated COMINT module with

filters to look for exactly the kind of traffic he was suspicious of, anything on the bands he had detected earlier, anything that was frequency hopping at high speed, anything that simply should not be happening here in 1942. In time he found something, and the seemingly innocuous alert that had set him on this search soon bore fruit. He waited two days just to be certain he really had something here, and then, convinced of what he was receiving, he decided to kick the matter up the chain of command.

“Lieutenant Rodenko, sir, I have an Electronic Surveillance Measure request.”

Rodenko looked over at him, somewhat surprised. “What for, Nikolin? Tired of regular rotations? Need something more to drill on? You getting bored under that headset?”

“No sir, I believe I have suspicious signals traffic and I would like to try and confirm it with some measurement and signals intelligence work.”

That got Rodenko’s attention. “Suspicious traffic? What is it?”

“Sir, I’ve been monitoring an intermittent signal burst—that’s what first got my attention. It’s a signal in burst mode, using high speed data transmission, and it’s frequency hopping all over the band. I set up a COMINT profile module to listen for it, and I have three separate interceptions—very low power to restrict range, but I got it on my primary antenna, and then used the top mast system to enhance reception.”

“It’s frequency hopping? How fast?”

“Too fast, sir. It has to be a computer modulated signal. I can’t read it, but if I had to bet on it, I would say someone is encrypting radio voice traffic for close in point-to-point transmissions. Should we run ELINT protocols to look for pulse rate transmissions that might be associated?”

Rodenko sat very quiet for a moment, a series of dominoes all falling one to another in his mind. This should not be happening, but this wasn’t any ordinary communications officer reporting to him now. This was Nikolin. He turned, slowly began toggling switches, and summoning the considerable power at his command to listen and detect errant electronic and radio signals.

“Feed me your data,” he said quietly.

Part XII

Reap the Whirlwind

“He who sows the wind shall reap the whirlwind.”

— **Hosea 8-7**

Chapter 34

The Japanese had been quite busy on Sakhalin Island since they occupied it in 1908. They had settled most of the habitable land there, which was mainly restricted to coastal sectors and some inland valleys that separated the rugged, tree sewn mountains. It was largely considered to be a military zone, though a good number of Japanese civilians from Hokkaido had also migrated there, part of the work force necessary to build out the infrastructure. Over the years, they had improved existing roads and built new ones, established numerous airfields and expanded ports. One significant addition was the building of railroads to improve overland communications from north to south.

Cultural influence and civilian occupation was heavier in the south at Ezu Province, the nearest to Hokkaido. That portion of the island extended like a great crab claw, which opened to embrace Chitose Bay, the approach to the first of two major ports on the island at Otomari. The Siberians had once called that place Korsakov, but now it was thoroughly Japanese, a thriving commercial port augmented by the fishing port of Aniva 20 kilometers to the east on that same bay.

The island then extended north along the crab leg through Maoka and Shikuku provinces, with rail lines winding north along both coasts. There, another well established port at Shikuka presided over the wide curving coastal region of Taraika Bay. It had formerly been called the port of Poronaysk , and from there a single rail line ran north into the central inland valley between two rugged spurs of highland mountains. It would pass through South Karafuto Province, following the line of a long winding river into North Karafuto, the beginning of the oil development region on the island.

Here Siberian influences were more pronounced, and there were still large inland segments of North Karafuto that were largely uninhabited by the Japanese, the province of the Ainu, Orok and Nivkh tribes, which were very friendly with Karpov's troops and worked for them in small guerilla groups, the local partisans.

The northernmost port worthy of the name was at Okha, where there was

also considerable oil field development already underway by the Japanese engineers. Earlier that winter, Karpov had flown in what amounted to a single battalion of Naval Marines and a few supporting troops to seize the northernmost tip of the island, occupying an area extending about 50 kilometers south. Now, with the sea ice finally permitting approach to the region, he was out to seize all of North Karafuto, which extended all the way as far south as the port of Lazarev on the Tatar Strait. That province sat right astride the mouth of the Amur River on the mainland, and the port of Nikola there. Karpov wanted to control that, and all the Tatar Strait as far south as Lazarev.

With limited sealift capacity, he would only be able to move a single regiment and its supporting guns and supplies, but he had all four mountain regiments of the 32nd Siberian Division earmarked for this operation. It began on the 15th of May, three days before Kurita was to rendezvous with Kutaka's carriers off Sapporo, so there would be no possibility for the Japanese to interfere with those initial landings aimed at Okha, which was all of 710 miles north of Sapporo.

Kirov was now standing off Okha, about 50 kilometers out into the Sea of Okhotsk, and so Karpov ordered Sergeant Troyak and his Marines to support the initial landing. Two KA-40s would be used, transporting all of Troyak's contingent, and another group of twenty men from Karpov's personal guard. Their mission was to land south of Okha, and seize the airfield the Japanese had built there, destroying any enemy aircraft they found. In spite of the growing threat, there was only a single company of Japanese troops at Okha, and when the Siberians transports arrived, they had no difficulty in getting ashore. Karpov soon had his port, and now the Naval Marines that had landed earlier were sweeping south to link up and complete his control of the northern segment of the island as far south as Okha.

Troyak and the other guard contingent then mounted up and took the helos due west to a point just north of Lupolovo on the west coast. The Japanese had two small airfields in the region, and they were to secure those, and then use the helos to keep an eye on the northern entrance to the Tatar Strait.

On the mainland opposite that strait, horsemen of the Bakshir, Yeseni, Ussuri, Amur and Siberian Cossack tribes were very active. They gathered in small battalion sized formations, securing all the vital roads and airfields in

the region of the Amur River Mouth, where there was no Japanese military presence. The small port of Nikola would be secured without a fight, whereupon the horsemen, their mission accomplished, proceeded to loot the village and eat whatever food they could find in the region. It would be some time before Karpov moved regular units in there, but he technically had his access port to the lower Amur region, where he planned to eventually build up a considerable force for the planned move up that river.

South of Okha, two companies of air guardsmen had been lifted in by airships to take up positions and block enemy reinforcements. There they ran into a company of engineers, and numerous other small detachments that had been working on those southernmost oil fields. That was also the headquarters for the single battalion that the Japanese had posted in the area, which was now making frantic calls to the south that the invasion had begun. He was informed to hold his ground, destroy the oil facilities to prevent their capture if necessary, and that two battalions were already en route from the south.

Colonel Kumida of 1st Battalion, 25th Karafuto Brigade, slammed down the radio handset, enraged that the Empire had not taken this threat more seriously. How could his single battalion possibly defend all of North Karafuto Province? His five rifle companies were scattered all along the coast, and now, a deep shadow suddenly shrouded the scene, he rushed out to see the massive shapes of many airships overhead. The wink of fire from an undercarriage recoilless rifle was most unwelcome.

The remainder of the 25th Karafuto Brigade was itself scattered all over Sakhalin Island, each of the five battalions having a specific province to garrison. 5th Battalion was detached from that duty and was coming up by train from the south west coast, a region deemed unlikely to see enemy landings any time soon, but it was stopped near the village and airfield at Nogaliki, where a tribal partisan group had cut the rail about 50 kilometers south of Kumida's position. He still controlled the major oil fields, with three of his rifle companies, an engineer company and a machinegun company, so he set about ordering his men to dig in near the main well sites while his engineers began to set demolition charges. Everything north of that area, all the way up to Okha, was indefensible, and his retreat south was already cut off by enemy troops off those damnable airships. Where was the air force?

It was well to the south. Given that the weather was always very bad in

North Karafuto, none of the fields there had any aircraft assigned. The nearest Squadron was well south, at the northernmost end of the long inland valley, where the headquarters of the 2nd Battalion had been established to guard the rail line and the road to Aleksandrovsk on the Tatory Strait. There were three Shotai there, a total of nine Ki-27 fighter bombers, the plane the Allies would come to call the 'Kate.'

The planes took off, soon running into a phalanx of airships under Karpov the Young, who had settled in quite nicely now as overall commandant of the Siberian Air Corps. He had six airships up south of Okha, and three more to the north. *Odessa*, *Narva*, and *Novosibirsk* began pouring out a hail of AA fire as the Japanese planes swooped down like jackals around a herd of water buffalo. Soon their fire was joined by *Orel*, *Angara* and *Abakan*, the 20mm top mounted guns proving very effective in discouraging those planes. A few Ki-27s made brave passes, with three quickly shot down, and the fourth seeing his machineguns seemed to have no effect on the unwieldy targets. Those self sealing gas bag liners were doing their job, and the Japanese would find it would take a much heavier cannon to put any real harm on the airships.

2nd Regiment of the 32nd Siberian followed the first into Okha on the 16th to begin pushing south along the east coast. On the night of the 17th, The Siberian Karpov informed his younger self that he would be lifting the 3rd Regiment into the Tatory Strait for a surprise attack on the vital ferry site at Lazarev. There the Japanese had a single company of Kumida's 1st Battalion on the island side of the ferry, and the mainland side had been garrisoned the previous day by a company detached from 5th Battalion. That company held Lazarev itself, but by mid-day on the 17th the opposite shore had been taken.

Destroyer *Maikaze* had been anchored at Nayoshi, the only Japanese warship in the Tatory Strait at the time. It was quickly ordered north with orders to interfere with that landing operation, and interdict the ferry site. This was going to set up a little duel there, as the younger Admiral was in *Tunguska*, heading south to support those landings with two other new T-Class airships, the newest additions to the fleet, *Siberia* and *Baikal*. *Maikaze* had begun to shell the Siberian positions ashore when the air squadron began closing on the scene, their recoilless rifles primed and ready.

On the bridge of *Tunguska*, Karpov was thinking this would be a time to

have Fedorov handy, but he was far to the north, on the other side of Sakhalin near Okha aboard *Kirov*. He wanted to know what kind of main guns this Japanese destroyer might have, then simply decided it would likely have something in the range of four or five inch deck guns. He was lucky the troops had all stormed ashore the previous night, because *Maikaze* also had 16 Type 93 torpedoes that would have wreaked havoc on the transports. But those six 5-inch dual purpose deck guns could also pose a grave threat to any of the airships, and Karpov was justifiably cautious.

He might put damage on the destroyer with one of his Koronet ATGMs. It would certainly penetrate, start a fire, or destroy any system it struck, but the warhead was only seven kilograms. These missiles were excellent bag busters against enemy airships, and he felt he would need many hits to truly mission kill that destroyer. He would also have to close to within 8 kilometers to fire, and that was well within the range of the enemy guns. In this instance, the best defense was his caution, and then he put in a call to *Kirov* on the other side of the island informing them of the situation.

As if sensing his brother self's thoughts, the Siberian sat up higher in the Captain's chair, suddenly alert. "Mister Nikolin," he said, "anything to report on comm links?"

"Well sir," said Nikolin, casting one eye towards Rodenko, as if checking to see if the Senior Lieutenant would give him any sign that he should make a report to Karpov concerning those odd signal intercepts. At that moment, his board lit up with an incoming call. Somewhat surprised, he toggled the switch and listened for the call sign. "Sir... I have *Tunguska* on the secure channel."

"Very well," said Karpov. "In my ready room." He got up and strode to the hatch next to the chart room where he had installed a radio set for these special communications. There he soon learned that his brother wanted a missile.

"We completed the landing, but if that destroyer persists in the straits, it may put unnecessary damage on the ferry terminals and dock at Lazarev. I can feed you telemetry from our Oko panel and you'll have a pinpoint on its position."

"Good enough, and well done, brother. The operation is proceeding very smoothly, thanks to your able supervision. Standby. I will see what I can do for you. Siberian One, over and out."

The Admiral strode back out to the bridge. “The ship will come to battle state one and make ready for surface target missile launch.”

“Aye sir,” said Samsonov, “sounding alert one and ready on SSM board.”

“Mister Rodenko, we will be receiving telemetry from *Tunguska* any second now. Feed it directly to the CIC.”

“Aye sir, getting a signal now.”

“Watch closely, Grilikov. This will be a good example of live fire action.” The big Sergeant was hovering near Samsonov’s position, where the two men often worked together now as Samsonov was training Grilikov on how to operate the missile launch systems. Grilikov settled into a chair next to Samsonov, and the two Goliaths hunched over the system board.

“Mister Samsonov,” said Karpov. “What is the range to the target.”

“Sir, I’m reading a single target at 228 kilometers—in the Tatar Strait, off Lazarev.”

“Correct. That will be a bothersome Japanese destroyer. It is right at the outer edge for our Moskit IIs, but the P-900s have the range easily. Sound inventory.”

“Sir, we have seven missiles remaining in the P-900 bank, including missile number ten.”

“Ready a single P-900, and fire. Set missile guidance to accept remote assist from the *Oko* panel on *Tunguska* on terminal approach.”

“Aye sir.... Missile ready, sounding launch warning and firing now as ordered.”

And that would soon be the end of *Kagero* class destroyer *Maikaze*, and a good number of her crew. The ship’s name meant ‘Whirlwind.’ It had sewn the wind with shells from its deck guns that day, unaware that a dangerous enemy was watching and waiting to strike. Now it would reap the whirlwind. The P-900 was effectively a cruise missile, and the longest range SSM in *Kirov*’s larders. Now there would only be six remaining, but the Japanese would have to trade a destroyer for that missile, and Karpov would secure both ends of that vital ferry site on the 18th of December.

* * *

Ryoko Otani was quick to spot the missile fire as the P-900 climbed to altitude for the subsonic cruise segment of its flight path. *Takami* was well

out in front of Kurita's task force, which was now slowly escorting the troop laden transports towards Karafuto. The safest and easiest port to debark them would be Otomari on Chitose Bay in the grasp of the lower crab claw made by the island. To screen them, *Takami* sailed off to take up station as a forward radar picket, well up the southeastern coast off a long spit of land that framed the eastern edge of Taraika Bay, called Cape Kira-Shiritoko. From that position they had a good look north up the long eastern coast of the middle and upper portion of the island. If *Kirov* moved south to get into any position to threaten the troop convoy, *Takami* would see that move easily enough.

The ship had assumed a stealthy EMCON mode, attempting to radiate as little as possible. Now that they were 'in theater,' a possible combat zone. Harada had ordered EMCON Alpha, total emissions silence. Since the SPY radar system was a passive phased array it could run in a mode known as 'SPY-1 Silent', and still receive and process signals radiated by the enemy, even while restraining its own signal emissions, and *Kirov* was radiating with no restraint, all over the spectrum, absolutely heedless of the fact that anyone might be out there listening.

The SPY system could see airborne threats out to about 175 nautical or 200 standard miles in this mode, and it wasn't until the P-900 was descending into its terminal phase that Otani saw it, for it had just then come inside that detection range. It was there, there, then suddenly gone. The missile had descended to just a few meters in height, down on the deck to skewer the *Maikaze*, and was below *Takami*'s detection threshold when it finally struck home. But Otani knew what threats she might be looking for, and this one filled the bill.

"Con, radar. I just picked up what looked like a missile descending to sea skim mode. Sending coordinates to the CIC now."

Chapter 35

“Understood,” said Harada. “Process it and tell me more. In the meantime...” He reached for the 1MC intercom to broadcast a message to all ship’s stations. “Now hear this, now hear this. We just got a whiff of our Russian nemesis out there, and it looked like they were already throwing some lead at somebody. Court’s in session and all stations will now come to order. For all you 90-day Blunders out there, that means rack time is over and it’s battle stations. I want everyone to emulate that time honored sailor of endless note—A. J. Squared Away. Do it now. This is the Captain. That is all.”

Harada’s time in training with the US Navy had seen him pick up a lot of the typical slang bantered about by their sailors. Now he looked to his radar station. “What was that contact, Lieutenant?”

“Had to be a missile sir. I’m figuring it was a P-900.”

“Get a line on its angle of approach?”

“Aye sir, just a few seconds, but it traces out to our estimated position based on SIGINT data.”

“Good enough. So who are they shooting at, and why all the way on the other side of the damn island?”

“Sir, that’s right at the Lazarus ferry crossing site,” said Michi Ikida, the ship’s navigator.

“So there must be an operation underway there,” said Fukada. They’d want that ferry site to establish communications with the mainland. It’s also the choke point on the strait. They can set up artillery there and then control access to the mouth of the Amur River from the south. How do you want to play this, Captain?”

“I don’t see anything we can do for that situation at the moment. Our watch is out here on the Sea of Okhotsk. The Siberians know that we’ll reinforce from Hokkaido, but they don’t seem too awfully concerned about it.”

“They’ve accepted that in lieu of getting their own troops ashore in the north.”

“It sure seems that way. Well, once they are ashore, and well established,

then they'll push south. That's when this *Mizuchi* comes south right along with them, and the fur starts flying. So this is my plan."

He walked over toward the navigation station, looking over the map on Ikida's screen. "We'll move here," he said, pointing to the long spit of land that framed the eastern edge of Taraika Bay. "We'll take up station just west of that isthmus. We'll know they are coming, but they won't expect us here. Hovering west of that long isthmus gives us a little screen from their Fregat system. We stay silent, EMCON Alpha. But my bet is we'll hear them coming like a bull in a China closet. They'll be radiating, just like they are now, and when they get close, we get our friends to attack with any land based air power they have on lower Sakhalin. During that attack, we pop up a Sea King, and fix their location. Kurita must have his carrier based aircraft ready and also vectoring in on them at this time. With any luck they'll just think it's another plane. Then we throw everything we have at them, all eight Type 1 SSMs, and we keep our fingers crossed. Comments?"

"An excellent plan," said Fukada. "But I have the icing for the cake. If we have them inside 50 klicks at that time, then we should use the deck gun as well. If not, then we should definitely use the rail gun."

"The rail gun? It was meant for missile and aircraft threats."

"True enough, but it can also lob that projectile out 200 Kilometers at Mach 7—and they can't stop it. If we get a hit, it might be the equivalent of a 90mm gun for the damage it could do. There's no explosive power, but it will damn well ruin any system it might hit on that Russian ship."

"Very well, I'll consider that. Anyone else? Mister Honjo, you've got the CIC. Any thoughts?"

"Just give me a target, sir. But I agree with what the XO says. If we go offensive, then we throw anything we have that might put damage on that ship."

"Alright. Where do we want Kurita in all of this?" The Captain waited, but as expected, Fukada was first to answer.

"He'll want to be aggressive once cut loose from that convoy escort. Those troops should be ashore by tomorrow morning. He'll come looking for trouble after that."

"Think we can dissuade him?"

"Why should we?"

“You want to expose those ships to a Moskit II barrage?”

“The more targets *Kirov* has to worry about, the better. I’d say we should let him sortie up the east coast as a fast surface action threat. Let *Kirov* take their shots, and then we can go after his SSMs—assuming they survive what we just discussed when we bushwhack them.”

“And the carriers?”

“They shouldn’t be anywhere near the action. I’d make a strong request that they operate from the lower Tatar Strait. Sakhalin Island will shield them from possible detection, but when they launch, those strike waves should fly due east, then turn northeast to overfly our position. They’ll have plenty of range. If they fly direct to the target, they’ll give away their bearing.”

“I agree, and I’ll see if I can make it so. Let’s just hope the Japanese cooperate. They can have a mind of their own, and as far as they are concerned, we’re just an auxiliary screening unit attached to Kurita’s group.”

“Well we need to get a handle on this. The way you have it planned, we might have a good chance to saturate *Kirov*’s defense. Maybe at least one of our missiles will get through. This is going to be interesting.”

“It’s going to be dangerous. Don’t anyone forget that. This is no drill, because if they get one missile through....” He didn’t have to finish.

* * *

Rodenko was the first to go to Karpov with the oddities discovered by Nikolin. The Admiral had been very pleased with operations now underway in North Sakhalin. He had dealt with that pesky Japanese destroyer, and his brother self concluded the seizure of the ferry site at Lazarus. Now he had the choke point on the Tatar Strait, and could position shore batteries there to prevent any further incursion by Japanese surface ships in the waters north of that point. This was important, because the next division he planned to sealift would go directly to the Amur River delta, where he would begin a buildup of forces there to secure that region and prepare for the drive that might eventually take him to Vladivostok.

On Sakhalin itself, he secured Okha, and then his tough Siberian troops quickly pushed south towards the oil fields. A battalion of the 25th Karafuto Brigade had been holding out there, with engineers trying to set charges. The fast moving Siberians stormed into the region, pushing swiftly through their

resistance and securing the fields. Some sustained damage, but that did not matter. The oil was there, and it could not be destroyed. Karpov had what he wanted, and by May 22nd he had control of the top third of Sakhalin Island, as far south as Lazarev.

For their part, Kurita's first objective in getting troops from the 7th Division from Sapporo to the lowermost Ezu Province on Karafuto had gone off unchallenged. Karpov, with limited sealift, deemed it essential that *Kirov* stand off Okha Harbor and protect those landings. If that meant he would permit the Japanese to reinforce from the south, so be it. His real intention at this stage was securing that valuable terrain, for there were airfields there that he could trade with the Americans like pearls for supplies and equipment.

The Admiral had been warned by Fedorov that the Japanese would have to respond to his incursions, but Karpov felt he could deal with them easily enough. "If they attempt to interfere with my landings, they will regret it," he said. "At the moment, there isn't even a whisper of protest from the Japanese Navy. Perhaps they've learned to fear and respect me, as they should."

"Sir," said Rodenko, "speaking of whispers. Nikolin and I have been trying to run down the source of some odd signals activity down south."

"Explain."

"Well sir, Nikolin thought he was hearing some high speed frequency hopping. That would be the kind of thing we might do in sending signals to friendly units with our equipment. But he thinks he located that traffic well south, so it wasn't any activity from our sets in the airship fleet."

"South... How far south. Mister Nikolin?"

"Sir, I first got a whiff of it two days ago. Rodenko was trying to help me by routing in a top mast antenna for better reception. Since we know where the enemy might be, I focused my search to the south, and set up a fingerprinting profile to look for anything suspicious in the traffic analysis. It's been very intermittent, but a couple signals got my attention. They were in high frequency bands that would not normally be used in the 1940s, and they were hopping like mad. Someone didn't want us to have a listen sir, and they had the means of protecting those transmissions with some very modern signals techniques."

"Modern techniques. We are the only systems that could be called modern out here."

"But they weren't ours, sir. I'm certain."

That got Fedorov's attention. He looked over his shoulder listening carefully as Nikolin continued explaining what he had done, and then stepped into the conversation. "This is something we should pay attention to," he said. "How frequent were these transmissions?"

"I've only heard three," said Nikolin, "and nothing in the last twelve hours."

"And the others?"

"All within this 24 hour period." He handed Fedorov his SIGINT chart.

"That would be the time we suspected landing operations from Hokkaido were underway," he said, looking to Karpov.

"Most likely communications related to that," said the Admiral. "Well, we already know they've sent at least two regiments. It's not a concern at this point."

"No sir, it's not the traffic, but the method of transmission here. Look at the frequency bands noted on Nikolin's chart. Nobody uses those channels, and look at this data on the frequency hopping. That could only be accomplished by computer controlled electronics. It just isn't the sort of thing vacuum tube equipment can do here."

"You're saying these signals were sent by modern day equipment?"

"Correct, and the fact that we can't read them is even more of a red flag. Nobody in the Pacific should have anything even approaching that capability for signals encryption."

Karpov's eyes narrowed. "I see..."

"Sir," Fedorov lowered his voice. "There are some matters I think we should discuss privately."

"Alright. Walk with me, Mister Fedorov. I need some air."

Out on the weather deck, Fedorov cleared his throat and set sail. "Sir, there are a few things you may not be aware of. While you were focused on building up your position here in Siberia, remember that Volsky and I had *Kirov* in the Atlantic."

"How could I forget," said Karpov, his voice laden with a tone that revealed some displeasure, though he did not take it any further than that.

"Yes... well you already know that *Kirov* was not the only vessel from our Russian navy to visit here. In the Atlantic and the Med, we encountered a few other... situations."

"That has an ominous ring to it. What do you mean?"

“It’s a fairly long story, but seen as though you are an Allied head of state now, you may as well know it. There is another modern day ship at sea in the Atlantic, a British ship.”

“What? You mean a modern British ship of war?”

“Not exactly, but yes. This was a private ship, though it was purchased from the Royal Navy, a *Daring* Class Destroyer that was then heavily upgraded and modified to be a corporate security vessel for a small oil conveyor, a company called Fairchild Enterprises.”

“It’s here? Now?”

“That it is.”

“But how is that possible? We had Rod 25—that’s what moved both *Kirov* and then *Kazan* around, yes?”

“That and something more. Did you initiate a rod replacement cycle during your engagement with the 7th Fleet? No. It was in the Primorskiy Engineering Center, sending me on my little train ride to look for Orlov.”

“That was a very fateful ride,” said Karpov.

“It was, but the point I am making is that *Kirov* moved, and on that occasion there was no nuclear event involved either.”

“That Demon Volcano,” said Karpov, remembering it all now. One moment they were sailing in the massive ash fall shadow of a VEI Level 7 Ultra-Plinian Super-Colossal volcanic eruption, with tsunami driven seas and ashen skies that blotted out the sun itself, sending them into a limbo of brimstone and pumice—then they were suddenly cruising on quiet seas, with a strange tinge of green fire in the ocean, and pristine white cumulus clouds in an azure blue sky. The distant silhouette of the Kuriles was calm and undisturbed. There was no sign of the eruption at all....

“So large explosive events can cause time displacement,” said Fedorov, “and that volcano was one hell of an explosion. Your proximity to the volcano may have been the reason you fell through.”

“Yes,” said Karpov, “to 1945, and with *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko* with me as well.”

“No magic control rods involved on any of those ships.”

“Alright Fedorov, you’ve made your point. What are you getting at with all this?”

“This ship we encountered in the Med came through somehow. I later learned that one cause could have been a missile strike aimed at its location in

2021. That aside, it was there, right in the middle of a rollicking fight with the Germans and Italian navies, and it's still operating in the Atlantic today."

"How very interesting," said Karpov. "Then that could not be the ship responsible for these signals intercepts, could it?"

"Most unlikely."

"And you were not secretly receiving a transmission from someone else using modern day equipment, eh?"

"Sir? Me?"

"Don't look so surprised, Fedorov. You know that would be something I would have to consider. Volsky may be gone now, but you and the British became a nice little cadre there for a while—comrades all."

"Well you can discard that notion," said Fedorov. "I'm not secretly sending and receiving signals."

"Could anyone else be doing so aboard ship?"

"Who? I doubt that very much, sir."

"Then these signals Nikolin reported are coming from another source. Do you have any theories?"

"Well... There was just another major VEI 7 eruption at Krakatoa. Ships in the vicinity may have been affected."

"Blown to hell, or elsewhere," said Karpov with a grim smile.

"What I'm suggesting, sir, is that when there is a big event like that, the integrity of the continuum is profoundly disturbed. You fell through, along with *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko*, and other ships could have fallen through during that event as well. But the key thing I'm trying to convey is this—if there's a hole opening in time, things can go both ways...."

"You mean... things could fall into that hole from the future? How so? The explosive event occurred here, in 1942. I could see how it might blow away a nearby ship, but how could anything get here from some future time?"

"Well, if there was an explosion below decks, and it was powerful enough, it could rupture this deck—and you and I could fall through the hole. Understand? Krakatoa was a massive eruption. We have no way of knowing how far into the continuum its effects propagated. If it reached into modern times, our day...."

"I get the picture. What you are saying is that we could be looking at the possibility of uninvited guests."

“We just may, sir. Something is out there on the VHF band sending signals they don’t want anyone else to hear, and using a method that requires modern electronics. We’d best be careful here until we know more.”

Karpov nodded. “Thank you, Mister Fedorov. Kindly send the order in to have the ship go to condition one alert. I think we’ll have a better have look around.”

Chapter 36

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May, 1942 ~ 08:00

That was now what was on the mind of Admiral Kurita—get up north and have a look around. With the ice retreating, the Sea of Okhotsk was now open, and it was his charge to give challenge to the enemy by taking his task force north. Lieutenant Kobayashi reported to the bridge of the battleship *Hiraga* with the latest message from *Takami*. It was asking him to do exactly what he had in mind. Captain Harada was taking up a position in Taraika Bay up near the port of Shikuka, old Poronaysk under the Siberians. He had requested that Kutaka's carriers move well west into the Tatar Strait and await a signal to then launch a strike wave and fly east to his position before being vectored north. Now Kurita was being asked to move north, up the east coast of Karafuto, towards the ongoing ground battle there.

Admiral Yamamoto asked me to cooperate with this Captain, thought Kurita, and as his mind and my own are in accord here, I will accommodate this request. Our troops up north will undoubtedly appreciate the sight of my battleships and cruisers off the coast.

For all his bravado, Kurita did not really have any idea what he was now going to be up against. The fledgling radar set that had been installed on *Hiraga* was incapable of ranging out to find the enemy ahead of him, or ever really effectively tracking its missiles. Kurita's squadron was, in effect, like a group of near blind men with shotguns, huddled together and needing to get within close visual range of a target to fire at it. That was all they could represent, a possible close range threat against a modern ship like *Kirov*. They would not even know that ship was there, unless *Takami* fed updated position and ranging information in via that secure radio set.

Kurita had no conception of this. In his mind, he was aboard one of the finest battleships in the world, and the verbal admonitions of Yamamoto could not convey the danger he was now sailing towards. The inspection of the damage on *Mutsu*, however, had been quite sobering. He spoke with crewmen and officers from that ship, who told him of the lightning fast rockets Yamamoto had warned him about.

“You will see them easily enough,” said one man. “They claw the sky like *Raiju*, more terrible than the sky demon *Itsumade*. Yes, you will see them when they come, but there will be nothing you can do to stop them. Look how the fires consumed our ship!”

“Did you fire back at them?”

The man smiled. “There was nothing to shoot at. We never saw the enemy ship—only these terrible rockets.”

That gave Kurita pause, but he steeled himself. “Then they are cowards if they refuse to face you in battle.”

“That may be,” said the officer, “but here sits *Mutsu*, a burned wreck, and the enemy still commands the northern sea.”

“We shall see about that.” Kurita put on an outward face of bravado, but even the smell of the charred metal on old *Mutsu* haunted him for some time.

So now he sailed north, his watchmen straining to see through the misty dawn, his men ready for anything that might come. Yet he and his entire task force were merely bait, meat being thrown to the wolf. The officers of *Takami* were trying to get the attention of their adversary, and had asked Kurita to pose a threat, and then to withdraw upon their signal.

But that is not what would happen...

Taraika Bay, 20 May, 1942 ~ 10:40

At the moment, *Takami* was sitting with its SPY-1D in silent mode. The system was unmatched insofar as radiation control in that stealthy listening mode. Those sensitive ears could detect and to some extent track contacts by receiving the target’s own RF emissions and also by receiving echoes from other third party sources that would reflect off the target. This was why Captain Harada had asked all the conventional strike elements to be very free with radio communications on their approach to *Kirov*’s suspected location, for even simple FM band radio could bounce off a target and be detected by passive radars listening for such a signal.

For much more precise tracking of a contact, the system would have to actively radiate its own radar pulses to illuminate the threat, but in doing so it would also give its own position away. Yet once clearly fixed on a target, the lightning fast chain of electronic reflexes would quickly pass information to the ship’s Command Decision System, (CDS), which evaluated threats and

sent the data directly to the Weapons Control System, (WCS), all in a heartbeat. There was no handover to a separate targeting fire control radar, which made AEGIS so quick and reliable on defense. The system was extremely robust, as technology injections had kept it right on the leading edge of what was possible, and the Japanese had upgraded to the AN/SPY-1/D(V) incorporating improvements in eliminating ground and background clutter.

“Kurita looks to be in position,” said Harada. “They should spot him before noon.”

“Should we get the helicopters up?” asked Fukada. “We’re not going to see anything over the horizon like this. All we’ll get is a general location on the target, and we already know that much now.”

“We need him to come south. Maybe they’ll take the bait.”

“Why should they?” said Fukada. “They have over the horizon strike capability. What makes you think they’ll come south? And I don’t like our position here. We’re bottled up in this bay, and can’t maneuver north. Your entire plan rests on the assumption that they’ll come to us.”

“You have a better idea?”

“I think we should backstop Kurita—move into his wake. If he gets too far north, then we can’t cover him with our SAM umbrella. We should get out of here and move east and north immediately.”

Harada thought about that. “Honjo?” he said to his CIC officer.

“He’s right, sir. We’re stuck here, and I can only throw the SM-2 about 75 klicks north of our position. If Kurita gets any farther north, he’s hung out there on his own.”

“What about our ERAM 174s?”

“I only have half a dozen, sir. Everything else is SM-2 unless you want me to use the SM-3.”

“No, keep them in the basket.” The Captain took a long breath, rubbing the back of his neck. “We need a better fix on their location, but if we sent up a helo we’ll give the game away.”

“Playing possum here won’t even get us in the game at all if he hovers up north,” said Fukada. “That’s what I’d do. His mission is to protect his troop convoys to North Sakhalin, and control the lines of communication back to Magadan. Our mission, now that our own troops have landed safely, is to interdict the enemy operations. We just can’t do that here.”

Harada nodded. "Alright. I hear you. Let's notify Kurita that we're moving east into his wake. As for the carriers and land based strike planes, they can continue to hold until we give the word."

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 11:10

It was that fleeting signal to the radio set on *Hiraga* that woke up Nikolin again that morning. He had been sitting, a bit bleary eyed, and wishing he had found some stronger coffee instead of tea that morning. But the COMINT profile module he had set up to listen for specific types of radio signals traffic was as wide awake as ever. The red light soon indicated that he had another fish in his net.

"Sir," he said to Rodenko again. "I've another signal intercept. Looks like it was directed north, and a little stronger this time—same profile, short burst HF transmission with rapid modulation and hopping."

Rodenko came over, looking over the data on Nikolin's board, and then decided enough was enough. He went directly to Fedorov, who had the watch that hour, and reported. "Another signals packet intercept sir. Same heading and modulation. Someone is down there whispering again."

Kirov had come south at 18 knots for the last 6 hours, radars sweeping the open sea and coastal regions of the long island. Now Fedorov thought it was time for a more active search.

"Mister Nikolin," he said. "Send a message to the Helo Bay. I want the KA-226 ready for launch in twenty minutes—aerial search and reconnaissance. We need to have a closer look down south. Make sure they have the long range module installed for the *Oko* panel."

"Aye sir."

Fedorov gave Rodenko a look, but said nothing. He merely reached for the overhead intercom and punched up the officers dining hall. "Admiral Karpov, please come to the bridge."

There would be no one in the dining hall to hear that call, for Karpov was up early and had finished his breakfast ten minutes earlier. He was already on the ladder up, and soon emerged from the main aft hatch, in what seemed like record time.

"That was fast," said Fedorov.

"What? You needed me? Well, here I am."

“We have a situation,” said Fedorov.

“Contact?”

“No sir, but more suspicious message traffic. I’m sending the KA-226 south to have a look around.”

“I’m still not sure what we think we might find there,” said Karpov. “But it will do no harm. Our operations here will soon be concluded. I have all three regiments of the 32nd ashore now, with supplies offloaded and the convoy withdrawing to Magadan this afternoon. This was a much easier operation than I first feared. I can relieve you now, Fedorov, if you’d care for a decent breakfast.”

“Sir, you have the bridge, but if you don’t mind, I think I’ll stay and see what this recon operation turns up.”

That tickled some inner sense in Karpov, for he knew his first officer very well by now. Fedorov was worried about something, and so was Rodenko. The delicate sensory network of the ship extended at the very end to the nerves and synapses of the men who stood their watches. They were good men all, and very capable in the positions they held. He needed to pay attention here.

It was not long before the KA-226 began to find pieces of the puzzle. It had moved south with impunity, at an elevation of about 15,000 feet. At that height its *Oko* panel had a marvelous view of the sea in all directions, spinning slowly beneath the undercarriage of the helicopter. About a hundred kilometers south of *Kirov*, it obtained its first contact, another 200 clicks south, and began feeding the data directly to the mother ship.

“Five contacts,” said Rodenko, “in a fairly tight surface action group. No telling what they are at this point, but signal strength is good, and I’m guessing that isn’t commercial traffic.”

That was a very good guess, for the KA-226 was looking at the battleships *Hiraga* and *Satsuma*, with three heavy cruisers, *Mogami*, *Mikuma*, and *Takao*. Kurita had been found.

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 12:15

“Con, Radar has an airborne contact, bearing 375 north, range 280 kilometers approximate, and closing at 200kph.”

Fukada looked at Harada, a knowing look in his eye. “Someone is getting

curious,” he said. “That has to be a helicopter.”

“Are we certain it isn’t a friendly off Sakhalin Island?”

“Could be, but they had orders to sit tight until we gave the signal for takeoff. And that contact is moving south.”

Harada rubbed his chin. This was not anything surprising. *Kirov* had helicopters available for recon and ASW missions, and this was undoubtedly one or the other. “They’ll be seeing Kurita by now,” he said.

“In another ten minutes they make us too,” said Fukada.

“But as far as they are concerned, we would just be another ship out here. If our EMCON is tight, we shouldn’t arouse any undue suspicion.”

“What if they get orders to eyeball the contacts. Some of those Russian helos have good long range optics and camera systems.”

“If he persists south towards Kurita we can make that call. Sure, we could take it down, but that would pretty much seal the deal insofar as who and what we are. The air strikes aren’t in position yet. We’ve got to coordinate this thing perfectly if we’re to have any chance of pulling it off.”

“Then I suggest we get those planes in the air,” said Fukada. “Every second counts.”

Harada nodded. Someone was out there strolling at the edge of the lawn, and likely to come right up the garden path and knock on his front door any minute now. He had to act.

“Lieutenant Shiota,” he said firmly. “Signal *Hiraga*—one phrase. *Climb Mount Takami*.”

“Aye sir.”

That was the prearranged signal to execute the plan. Land based planes would approach *Kirov*’s suspected position from the southwest, the wiggle of that jab in Harada’s mind. The carrier based planes would come due east to his position, then turn north. Once they got there, he would get his own helos in the air, use them to find *Kirov*, and vector the strike waves in. His only problem now was the need to close the range as quickly as possible, so he could bring that big right hand into the fight. The Type 12 SSM could only range out 120 kilometers.

“Sir,” said Fukada. “We should get a helo up as well. If we stay passive, it should still get a good fix on their location.”

“And if they tag our Sea King?”

“Sure, they’ll see it, but it will just be an airborne contact. They would

probably assume it's just a seaplane. We've got to know where they are to have any idea how much sea room we've got to eat up here. We need to nail down the range to target, and fast."

Harada had written the score, but now it seemed that Fukada was conducting the orchestra. He was much more on edge than the Captain, and his reflexes prompted him to take some action. They weren't going to win this thing by simply playing possum.

"Agreed," said Harada. "Let's get Whisky-T in the air and have them move as far north as Kurita. But I don't want them bumping noses with that bogie out there. You're right about those cameras on the Russian helos. Helm—ahead full and steady as she goes."

"Aye sir, engines ahead full and steady on."

It was about to begin.

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 12:32

"Con, airborne contact, low and slow, bearing 180 south of our helicopter."

Karpov came over, eyeing the contact on Rodenko's screen, all telemetry being fed by the *Oko* panel on the KA-226. The helo had been loitering, watching the approach of Kurita's task force, but now Karpov was concerned.

"A single plane?"

"Looks that way sir," said Rodenko. "Could be a seaplane off a cruiser."

"Or a carrier."

"I wouldn't think that," said Fedorov joining them. "If it was a carrier there to cover that forward group, they should have combat air patrols up by now."

"This could be exactly that, the first plane to take off."

"Well, the KA-226 is in no danger at this point," said Fedorov. "They would have to get within visual range."

At that moment, Nikolin spoke up again. "Admiral, sir. There it is again. COMINT profile has just picked up another transmission—very short burst this time, and aimed directly north."

"North?" Karpov's eyes narrowed. "Then it wouldn't have originated from that forward group of five contacts. Who would they be signaling? It

had to come from this ship here.” He tapped the screen to indicate the lagging contact. “They’re sending orders of some kind. That is a command ship, perhaps a flagship calling the shots. Very interesting.”

Rodenko was looking at his data very closely now. “You may be correct in that sir. The forward group has just increased speed by at least ten knots.”

Karpov looked at Fedorov. “A little cavalry charge,” he said with a grin. “Very well, I’m going to assume that is a surface action group up front, and that they are now attempting to close on our position.”

“How could they even know we’re here?” said Fedorov.

“Oh, they know we’re up here alright. They certainly won’t have a good fix on our position, but they know what we’ve been doing off Okha, and they’re sending this little group in to try and interdict our supply runs. It looks like the lesson we gave them off Kamchatka needs to be repeated.”

It was then that the situation took another twist. They all saw it, the red light on Rodenko’s board, and then the new contact winking on from the southwest.

“Airborne contact,” said Rodenko. “Three... five No, it’s looking like a good deal more, I have 15 contacts now, but they’re dispersing into multiple groups of three.”

“*Shotai*,” said Fedorov quietly.

“Mister Fedorov?” Karpov gave him a glance. “A strike aircraft?”

“A three plane formation, sir. That’s what the Japanese name a sub flight within a squadron—*Shotai*.”

“Look now, sir,” said Rodenko. “There’s another group—nine planes. The bearing is slightly off. I don’t think they really know where we are.”

“But they’ll be fanning out to search,” said Karpov. “That’s what this dispersal is all about.” He shook his head, having seen this so many times before, from the British long ago, and now the Japanese. “The ship will come to air alert one—S-300 system.”

Rodenko punched the alarm, the jangled nerves of the ship tightening up the sinews of war. Everyone on the bridge straightened in their seats, sitting taller, more alert. The tension was obvious, except around Karpov, who seemed completely calm and deliberating.

“The Japanese Navy,” he said, somewhat disdainfully. “So here they come at last, only they have no idea what they are getting themselves into. This time we teach them with the hard stick of war. Here they come, sewing

the wind with their silly little planes. Now they reap the whirlwind.”

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: *Second Front*

Karpov is set to punish his unwary enemy, but the confrontation in the Sea of Okhotsk soon escalates into the shock and violence of modern warfare as *Kirov* faces a most unexpected adversary. The battle that will soon be joined could decide the fate of all concerned, a desperate throw of the dice by the Captain and crew of DDG-180, against the most powerful opponent they will ever face.

Meanwhile, the German Army has now recovered from the long, cold winter, and Eric von Manstein is ready to lead a strong new offensive push to the south. His objective is to finally link up with the forces of Ivan Volkov in the Caucasus, which would put the Axis in a position to pose a grave threat to Iran, Iraq and the entire British position in the Middle East.

Realizing that the Soviet Union could still collapse in late 1942, the Allies struggle to forge a plan that will open a second front in the West. President Roosevelt has given his consent to launch the first daring offensive of the war—Operation Torch. It will be aimed at French North Africa, intending to cut off German supplies to the Canary Islands and unhinge their Condor offensive. German occupied Gibraltar still guards the gateway to the Mediterranean Sea, as well as a terrible secret hidden beneath the Rock. Can the Allied forces storm and reclaim that vital port before the Germans learn what lies within their nest?

Coming Soon...

Kirov Series: Battle Book II

Vendetta

The Rise of Karpov & the Struggle Against Volkov

One of the longest running subplots of the *Kirov* series centers on a central character in the saga—the irrepressible Vladimir Karpov. Sometimes a hero, most times a villain, Karpov has dominated the action from the very beginning of the series, set in opposition to Volsky and Fedorov in his ceaseless quest to take control of the mighty *Kirov* and use it to impose his will on the world in which he now finds himself marooned.

Beginning on the bridge of *Kirov* in that tense and fateful moment at the climax of Season 1, *Armageddon*, the author now knits together, all the material depicting Karpov’s return and rise to power in the world he shattered in 1908. The tense situation on Siberia’s western border soon brings him into contact with Ivan Volkov, and the two men meet, with the real identity of each man revealed. That begins a long vendetta, as Karpov and Volkov become arch rivals and struggle for control of what seems like a lonesome backward railway inn in the small, insignificant hamlet of Ilanskiy.

Volkov will launch three successive raids using his formidable airship navy, each one more elaborate and powerful, coloring the action with a wash of Steampunk as Zeppelins duel in the skies for air superiority, while special forces and Marines battle on the ground for control of the vital railway inn and its dark hidden secret. Think of it as the “Director’s Cut” for this intriguing and engaging plot line featuring the long feud and war between the two great villains in the series. Includes new scenes and “outtakes” added to the story by the author as he stitches together material from twelve series novels into one continuous and uninterrupted narrative of this plot line, including a secret plan by Volkov not yet revealed in the main saga.

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 reaching the end of Season 3, as the Allies launch their first offensive in the West—*Second Front*.

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. You can enter the series at any point of interest by reading the novel that immediately precedes your desired entry point, as it also acts as a prelude to events beginning each season.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

- 1) *Kirov*
- 2) *Cauldron Of Fire*
- 3) *Pacific Storm*
- 4) *Men Of War*
- 5) *Nine Days Falling*
- 6) *Fallen Angels*
- 7) *Devil's Garden*
- 8) *Armageddon – Season 1 Finale*

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

- 9) *Altered States*
- 10) *Darkest Hour*
- 11) *Hinge Of Fate*

- 12) *Three Kings*
- 13) *Grand Alliance*
- 14) *Hammer of God*
- 15) *Crescendo of Doom*
- 16) *Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

- 17) *Doppelganger*
- 18) *Nemesis*
- 19) *Winter Storm*
- 20) *Tide of Fortune*
- 21) *Knight's Move*
- 22) *Turning Point*
- 23) *Steel Reign*
- 24) *Second Front – Season 3 Finale*

And yes, there will be a season 4 as the war moves into 1943-44

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