

Kirov Saga

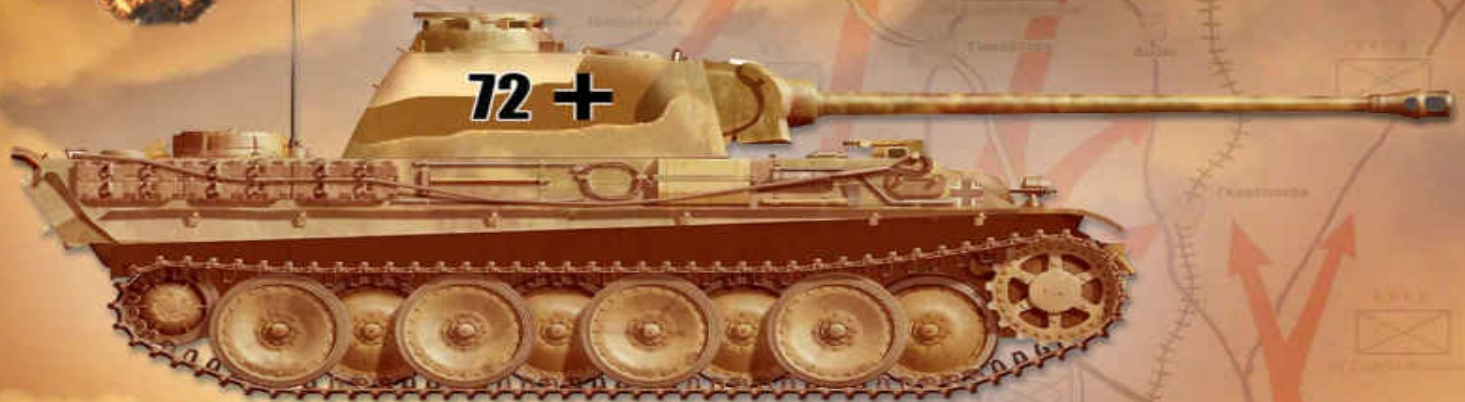


Book 31 in the Kirov Series

Nexus Deep

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Nexus Deep

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

The process winds its way to the conclusion of yet another volume. It's no mean task to produce a new series book in just 60 days. Keeping to my discipline of completing at least one eight-page chapter per writing day, I need 36 days of writing to get my first draft. There is also research and simulation design involved for the battles, which can be quite time consuming. After that, it is all about texturing, sandpapering, proofing to eliminate my inevitable typos. Like Karpov with his missiles, I get most everything, but sometimes, as he would say it, "something gets through—something always gets through." That said, it's usually not anything big enough to sink the ship.

I listen to the whole manuscript using Ivona Voice Brian (UK), and I find it to be the highest quality voice reader I've ever heard. He helps me to spot my 'though vs thought' typing issues, and also lets me listen to the dialogue between characters to assess how it all flows. In many ways, I punctuate to please Brian more than to pay homage to established rules, though I mostly keep to them in any case. In effect, I have punctuated the manuscript so that Brian sounds more natural when reading it aloud, and I have even created a custom pronunciation dictionary to coach him on proper names, German, Japanese and Russian.

This volume now takes us into Mid-1943, with big events unfolding on both the east and west fronts. As there was no disaster at Stalingrad in this alternate history, the real "Turning Point" in the war happens here in these crucial months. Both the Soviets and the Western Allies have now realized that they have gained parity on the battlefield against the formerly unbeatable German Army. One might argue that it was only lack of German military commitment that allowed the US and British to drive inexorably from Casablanca in Operation Torch, to the final battle at Tunis, but logistics truly ruled the day on that account. There were only so many divisions that ports like Tunis, Tripoli, Bizerte and Benghazi could support, and to use them, the Axis navies had to at least have parity with their foes.

After the big battle off Fuerteventura during Operation Condor, it seemed that the Axis fleets never again mounted a strong challenge to Tovey in the

West, and if they could, there was always *Kirov* to weigh in heavily on the Allied side.

Yet it was not mere naval dominance that sealed the fate of the Axis position in North Africa, but also a dramatic shift in the balance of power in the air. By July of 1943, the Allies had not only local air superiority, but actual air supremacy in the theater as a whole. That really put the screws to the German supply effort into Tunisia, and this volume will present the conclusion of the war in North Africa. (Meaning I can now finally produce the next battle book to mate with *Foxbane* and present the entire uninterrupted history of the North African Campaign over those two volumes.)

In the east, Manstein has had his hands full of late, fighting battles with Hitler, and on the ground against an increasingly powerful Soviet Army. In this volume, he will perceive a palpable change on the field, that Turning Point that he takes to be a harbinger of bad things to come. Even Hitler will be forced to see Germany's situation differently, and he will have to make some very sweeping changes in this book to try and stem the Red tide.

In the meantime, the main character based "missions" are all on track, with things happening in 1804, 1908, and also 1943. Those story lines will come into more focus in the Season Four Finale and through the Premier of Season 5. As I'm writing the series at the pace the war was actually fought, it may be this time a year from now before we see the landings in France, but that will all depend on what the Generals decide. As you will see in this volume, they make choices their historical counterparts did not, and who knows where the war will lead things. Now, deep in 1943, we have some great action ahead as the Allies look to clear North Africa and knock Italy out of the war, and, at the rate things are going, Sergei Kirov and Zhukov will set their sights on the Dnieper soon.

Enjoy! - *John Schettler*

Part I

Minerva's Curse

*“Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed...”*

—Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Chapter 1

On the morning of May 1st, 1943, the battleship HMS *Nelson* eased away from her anchorage at Alexandria and turned her long, heavy bow out to sea. Right in her wake the formidable presence of the old battleship *Warspite* moved slowly into formation. Things were heating up in the Med, and Admiral Cunningham had received some alarming intelligence that the Germans were about to make a very significant move. Their Black Sea Fleet, a formidable group consisting of *Frederick de Gross*, *Bismarck*, the fast battlecruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm*, carriers *Prinz Heinrich* and the *Goben*, escorted by three Italian light cruisers and six German Destroyers, was finally on the move.

The enemy had been masters of the Black Sea, destroying the last remnants of the Soviet fleet there, and harassing the far coastline of Georgia as the Germans pushed into the Caucasus. It moved from Novorossiysk to Sevastopol, and on occasion to Constanta, but this time it was heading for Istanbul. From there it would be an easy move through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles into the Aegean Sea, and that meant trouble. The dark steel shadow that had once held the Allied fleets at bay in the Central Med was returning.

Cunningham set his flag aboard *Nelson*, proud to have it there, and at his side was a new Captain for the ship, the Honorable Guy Herbrand Edward Russell, taking over for Captain Jacomb, who was going into retirement after long service that began as a Midshipman in 1909. Russell was a good man, coming over from the Heavy Cruiser *Cumberland*, and a veteran of all the action in the Canary Islands Campaign, where he had been Mentioned in Dispatches for conspicuous gallantry in the face of enemy fire. He was fated to meet and sink the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* in the Battle of North Cape, but in this history that rendezvous would have to wait. Bigger things were alive on the sea that morning, and Russell, with *Nelson*, was going out to meet them.

“Fine day for a brawl,” he said to Cunningham. “Do you think they mean to try us, sir?”

“We have to assume that,” said Cunningham. “The Turks are skittish about allowing warships through the Bosphorus. A pity we didn’t get this

news earlier. We might have tried to get bombers in there to stop them.”

“The Aegean has been the Luftwaffe’s playground for months,” said Russell, “particularly after we lost Crete. Now bombers out of Benghazi and other fields in Libya have to go right over all those lovely airfields on Crete and dance with Jerry’s fighters.”

“That’s not the real problem,” said Cunningham. “With Rommel sticking his nose into Damascus, and O’Connor a thousand miles away in Tunisia, our own air forces have been split in two. We’ve barely enough to cover both fronts, but it looks like we’ve finally stopped Rommel.”

“Could this move by Admiral Raeder have anything to do with the campaign in Palestine?”

“I doubt it. What would they do, shell the Germans on the coast near Tartus? It wouldn’t be worth the effort, or the risk.”

“Then might they have a go at the Suez Canal?”

“Oh, they’d love nothing more than to put that out of action, and that’s why we’re here. Our first job is to put up a steel wall in the Eastern Med and dare them to come for us. But I rather think they’ll have other business. I believe they’ll turn west once they get down near Crete under friendly air cover, and make for the Ionian Sea. From there, Taranto would be a safe harbor, or they might even be so bold as to try the straits of Messina. A pity we lost Malta in a situation like this.”

“We could get after them, sir.”

“We could, but not until we know their course is truly west, and not south. No Captain, this is a defensive sortie, as much as I’d love to take Raeder by the lapels and give him a good shaking. He’s got a ten-knot speed advantage on us, so if he does take a westerly course, we’ll never catch him. It will have to be up to the air force. All we can do is make a brave show here and thumb our nose at him. I’m afraid Raeder won’t risk his ships in any action with us now. His real trouble is in the Central Med. Tovey’s been putting the squeeze on their supply runs into Tunis and Bizerte with Operation *Retribution*. That’s what I think this movement is all about.”

“Then you believe Raeder will try to break the blockade?”

“If he can. First he has to get his ships west and into the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the Air Force might get after him in the Straits of Messina. After that, if he does get through, he might lay over at Naples and operate from there with what remains of the Italian fleet.”

“We gave them a good thumping a few weeks back,” said Russell.

“That we did,” said Cunningham.

The Captain was referring to the attack made on the Italian base at La Maddalena, in the Straits of Bonifacio between Corsica and Sardinia. In April, the Americans had sent 84 B-24 Liberators to bomb the place, sinking the Heavy Cruiser *Trieste*, a pair of motor torpedo boats, and damaging the cruiser *Gorizia* so badly that she had to be towed to La Spezia. It was all part of Operation *Retribution*, a move to neuter the Italian Navy, choke off supplies to Tunisia, and eventually allow Allied ships through the Sicilian Narrows, opening the whole of the Med to friendly sea traffic.

That would not happen just yet, for the enemy had one more card to play in that game, and it was his Ace. Admiral Raeder’s fleet represented a powerful threat, and *Nelson* was out that day to stand the first watch.

“Perhaps we can keep Raeder in port,” said Cunningham. “Our bombers can reach Naples easily enough, so he might have to run off to La Spezia with the Italians, or even return to Toulon. Then we’ll have to watch him like a hawk, for one day or another, he’ll have to come out and face his last hour.”

“Well sir, we might be slow, but those nine 16-inch guns can still deliver a good punch,” said Russell. “Let’s hope *Nelson* will be there to join the action. That would be a grand show.”

* * *

Even as HMS *Nelson* turned north to take up her watch, the man that ship was named for was standing his own patrols out to sea, and from that very same base that had been bombed by the American B-24s. It’s strategic position in the Bonifacio strait allowed him to anchor his Mediterranean Fleet at the Maddalena Islands, and lie in wait for the French out of Toulon.

Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson, 1st Viscount Nelson, 1st Duke of Bronté was ailing, but determined. He had been bothered by a hacking cough of late, something he was often prey to with his endless hours at sea. With his flag aboard HMS *Victory*, he had been at sea since February of that year, operating from La Maddalena, and sending squadrons of two and three frigates to cruise off Toulon and spy on the French.

“Bad weather again today,” came the voice of Nelson’s Flag Captain, Sir Thomas Hardy.

The Admiral looked up, as if noting the grey skies for the first time, and nodded. “Any further dispatches from our patrols off Toulon?”

“Not yet,” said Hardy, “though *Arrow* is expected hourly.”

“The moment the French Fleet leaves that port, it can have as many destinations as there are countries in these waters,” said Nelson. “They have designs upon Sardinia itself, and would like nothing more than to occupy the island, which would deny my squadrons these waters as a preferred station to stand this watch. Well, let them try. We are in right fighting trim. I never saw a fleet altogether so well officered and manned. It’s the weather that bedevils me as much as the French, but if I am to watch them, I must be at sea, and if at sea, I must contend with bad weather. If our ships are not fit to stand bad weather, they are useless.” [\[1\]](#)

“Well sir, word is that they’ve no more than a fistful of fighting sail there at Toulon, though Admiral La Touche is undoubtedly been sent to remedy that.”

“Indeed,” said Nelson, “well I should like to take his charge, and my preferred remedy would be to see that fleet at the bottom of the sea.”

Nelson’s opposite number on the side of the French was one Vice-Admiral Louis-Rene Madalaine La Touche Treville, a man who had had been dueling with British frigates since the time of the American Revolution. He had only lately come to Toulon from Boulogne, where Napoleon ordered him to organize the massive fleet of transport ships to be used for the invasion of England, and to repel British raids led by Nelson on that port in an attempt to unhinge that plan. So the two men had little love for one another, and now La Touche was at Toulon reorganizing a part of the fleet that would soon meet Nelson at the famous Battle of Trafalgar.

With only seven ships of the line and three frigates, La Touche nonetheless kept up a regular patrol off the port to discourage British reconnaissance, which was frequent, as Nelson was eagerly waiting for the French to sortie so he could catch La Touche at sea and engage. It would never happen, at least under La Touche, who would die in just a few months of a fever. Another Admiral would take his place, Pierre-Charles Villeneuve.

At this time, Admiral Nelson had chosen the excellent anchorage off the Maddalena Islands, Sardinia, as his principle operating base to keep an eye on the French. That small island was at the eastern end of the Bonifacio Strait, the narrow waters between Corsica to the north and Sardinia to the south. Nelson would, indeed, send small groups of two or three ships to Toulon to keep an eye on the French, and on one occasion, La Touche sortied with four ships of the line and three frigates to drive off a squadron of three

British ships. He then boasted in a letter that he had driven off the entire British fleet, putting Nelson to flight, which rankled the British Admiral.

"I'll make him eat that letter if I catch him at sea," warned Nelson. "I'll put the damn thing right down his gullet. He dared venture out with seven ships before returning to port. If he carries on with this game, I will soon put salt on his tail, and my ships will make his look like a plum pudding!"

"Indeed, sir," said the Captain. "On the matter of letters, the secretary has prepared the drafts from your dictation last evening. If you'd care to review them, I have them at hand."

"There was the matter of the *Cameleon*, and I should look that one over," said Nelson. "Good of Captain Raynsford on the *Morgiana* to clue us in on what's been going on in the Adriatic. I sent her up with the Fish Ships some months ago, and Raynsford's report was quite enlightening. I have therefore ordered Captain Thomas Staines and *Cameleon* to get up there and deal with those French Privateers."

Nelson took the sheaf of papers from the Captain, reading that order carefully to make certain it was drafted as he wished. "Catching them by surprise is the key," he said. "So this order was noted as most secret. I think it also wise to get a general order off to all ships in the fleet, that they are on no account to interfere with Captain Staines, or demand sight of his orders."

"That's been drafted as well, sir."

"Good... Ah, this last one is a bit curious. I wonder what Lord Elgin has his hands on now?"

He read the order, with a half smile.

'TO: Captain Charles Marsh Schomberg, HMS *Madras* .
Victory, At Sea, 2nd September 1804

Sir,

Lord Elgin having requested through Sir Alexander Ball that I would allow a Ship to call on Cerigo, to bring from thence to Malta some marble antiquities, and as I am perfectly disposed to meet his Lordship's wishes on this occasion, I am to desire you will send a small Transport to Cerigo, with the first Convoy going up the Levant, and leave her there, for the purpose of receiving the antiquities before-mentioned on board till the return of the Convoy, when you will direct the Officer in charge thereof to call at Cerigo, and bring the Transport with his Lordship's antiquities on board, safe under

his protection to Malta, when Sir Alexander Ball will direct the disposal of them; and if it is intended to send them to England, you will give the necessary orders accordingly.

I am, &c.

NELSON and BRONTE.

Much of the Admirals daily ritual was the dictation and drafting of these long-winded orders to various fleet units, a single sentence that, in this case, spanned an entire paragraph. Yet he was very thorough, always leaving no question as to what was desired and so ordered. To Alexander Ball at Malta he would also write a more succinct note, embedded in a long two-page draft. *'I will Direct the Agent of Transports to send a Vessel to Cerigo with the first Convoy destined into the Levant for Lord Elgin's things, if she will lay safely there, and one of our ships shall call for her upon her return.'*

That brief sentence summed up his prior order nicely, but the Vice-Admiral would never know just what he had set in motion with his directive. Cerigo was the Venetian name given to the Island of Kythira, or Kythros in that day. It was the mythical haunt of Aphrodite and Eros, though the enchantments of love were the farthest things from the mind of Lord Elgin, who was a most industrious man.

His Lordship had been put on to the idea by the architect building his new home, "Broome Hall" in Scotland, a Mister Harrison. Since Greek artwork was all the rage in the Kingdom, why not obtain casts of some original Greek carvings, and then use them to decorate the new mansion? Appointed as Ambassador to Constantinople, Lord Elgin could stop off at Athens on his way there to look for suitable antiquities.

The Acropolis was a Turkish Army garrison site at that time, but Lord Elgin had been in Constantinople in 1800, just after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, and that service would put him in a good light with the Ottoman Turks, who controlled all of Greece and North Africa at that time. The British aid to the Turks in Egypt against Napoleon's invasion had opened the door to Elgin obtaining permission, in a written "firman," obtained by his Chaplain and Secretary, the Reverend John Hunt. The document was written by Hunt himself, seeking permission to view, draw, and model the art of the Parthenon frieze, make excavations and remove stones of interest.

It would lead to 10 months' hard work, where Lord Elgin had as many as 300 workmen under his employ at considerable cost, but he would end up

removing fifteen metopes, and seventeen pedimental fragments, one of which was the Selene Horse.

By a strange coincidence, the poet Byron was in that very place, staying at a hotel near the Acropolis, and one of the artists commissioned to copy the frieze met him there. The famous poet would later decry the dismembering of the Parthenon in his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, but he would also write a much more scathing satirical poem titled *The Curse of Minerva* (never intended for publication) in which he named Elgin outright. Many, like Byron, looked on Lord Elgin's work as plunder and vandalism, while others called it an act of historical conservation, for the Acropolis was enduring considerable damage from the Turks. Some say his Lordship vainly wanted the art to decorate his home; others insisted that he had the more noble motive of enriching an understanding of the arts in England. Neither side ever knew of the treasure hidden in those 'stones of little value,' as Lord Elgin would often refer to them to put off the curiosity of others.

Like many who set themselves to meddling with antiquities, angry fates stalked them soon after. Minerva's Curse was waiting to make its mark on Lord Elgin's life. Satisfied the work was well in hand, he resolved to return to Britain, leaving instructions on how to transport the Marbles home. Yet neither he, nor his 'antiquities' would get to England any time soon. His Lordship was in Paris when the Treaty of Amiens collapsed, and was put under arrest. Bonaparte was laying plans to invade England, massing ships at Brest, Boulogne, and other ports, and a plot was hatched to falsely implicate Lord Elgin in a scheme to set the French Fleet at Brest on fire. Thankfully, it never came to fruition, and Lord Elgin would eventually be released.

His wife would travel home separately, having an affair with one of her escorts along the way, which led to a bitter public divorce. Lord Elgin himself would be afflicted by an ailment that disfigured his nose, and he would soon be unemployable, at least in any further governmental capacity. All he had left were the Marbles... and the secret that they hid beneath the finely sculpted lines of the Selene Horse.

While he languished in captivity in Paris, his precious 'antiquities' would suffer their appointed fate off the Island of Cerigo, when his ship, the *Mentor*, ran aground and sunk, taking all her cargo with it. Years would pass as his Lordship and his Agents worked at further expense to find, recover and salvage the lost artwork, and it is at this time that some unexpected 'visitors' would come into the story, in a most arcane and mysterious way....

Chapter 2

“**Well** Mum,” said Mack Morgan. “Having the blessing of the Prime Minister is one thing, but actually pulling this crazy mission off is quite another. Do you realize it’s over 1500 miles from Gibraltar to this island?”

“Cerigo?”

“I thought it was Kythros. Well, whatever it’s called, how do you suppose we get there? The Argonauts have inflatables and such, but nothing we’d ever get through that crevice entrance in the cave, and certainly nothing that would be suitable for traveling that distance in the Mediterranean Sea!”

“No,” said Elena, “I realize an inflatable is out of the question. But we have sea faring men aboard. Yes?”

“Yes, but then there’s the little matter of finding a ship.”

“Well, there has to be something suitable at Gibraltar.”

“No argument there. It’s likely there will be warships, patrol craft, merchantmen in the harbor, but all going about their business. Are you saying you intend to simply commandeer a ship? Then what? We can take five men, six at the most for a mission like this. That’s not enough to crew a ship that can get us the 1500 miles to the island.”

Captain Gordon MacRae had expected this sort of inquiry from Morgan. His intelligence chief was known to be a careful and thorough man, and not one to leave any detail of a mission like this unconsidered or accounted for. He simply smiled when Morgan gave him that wide eyed look that signaled his displeasure.

“These ships come with crews,” said Elena, matter of factly.

“They do, but then we add impressment to commandeering and I’d say we’ll make a fine ship of pirates, all out for a little unscheduled jaunt to the Greek islands and back. Of course, there’s no Royal Navy in the Med to be worrying about, and no one will mind one whit if we do such things.”

Morgan was being sarcastic, of course, for there was a strong Royal Navy presence in the Med that year, commanded by Admiral Nelson himself, intent on blockading the port of Toulon. He wasted little time sharing this information with Elena, folding his arms with the sort of finality that said he had made an unassailable point to settle the argument.

“That would be a fine mess—Lord Nelson out after us with half the

British Mediterranean Squadron.”

“How would he possibly know we were at sea,” Elena protested. “Come on now, Mack, it’s not like the folks at Gibraltar are going to get off a radio message to the man. There’s no way he could be contacted before we’ve done our business and returned.”

“Are you so sure of that?” Morgan wasn’t giving up his hill. “Suppose a ship is dispatched after us, and they get to Nelson with news that one of their vessels has been seized by pirates? We’ve no way of knowing that Nelson would never learn of our doings.”

“Of course, there’s always a risk, but I like my odds that we would get away Scot-free, and remain unbothered by the Royal Navy.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Morgan. “These ships might be lucky to make 12 knots, on a good day, and the wind won’t always be our friend. So let’s just say you average ten knots, day and night. That will be nearly a week to the destination, weather permitting. If we give ourselves some leeway, let’s say ten days out, a few days ashore, and ten days back. It’s only 800 nautical miles to Toulon from Gibraltar. If anyone follows us, or sends word to Nelson by ship, he could learn that we’ve pirated this ship four days after we leave!”

“Speculation,” Elena waved her hand.

“And then the good Admiral could have a squadron patrolling the Sicilian Narrows to intercept us on the way home.” Morgan persisted.

“How would they know we’d be returning to Gibraltar?”

“He wouldn’t, but he might easily calculate our farthest on, and if anyone spots our direction as heading east into the Med, he’d know our approximate whereabouts the day he receives the news, at least along that circle. In fact, that’s where we’d be—right in the Sicilian Narrows four days out of port from Gibraltar.”

“Mack, we could be anywhere within that farthest on. There’s no way he could determine our real location, and even if he did, Toulon is what, 500 miles north of the Sicilian Narrows? He could get the news, send out his ships, and we’d be two days ahead of them. They’d never find us.”

Morgan was getting more frustrated. “I don’t like it,” he said. “There was a lot going on in the Med. The bloody Americans even had a military naval squadron there, out after the very sort of thing we’d be doing—piracy! Ever hear of the Barbary Pirates? They operated off the Algerian and Libyan coast, and used Tripoli as a main harbor. Miss Fairchild, these are dangerous

waters. So I hope you plan on hijacking a warship. It's very likely that we'll run into other ships, and some may not be friendly, even if we do give Lord Nelson the slip."

"Point taken," said Elena. "But we can handle ourselves."

"Aye, that we can," said Gordon. He had been listening, somewhat amused with Morgan's frustration, but he knew the man had good reason for his misgivings, and now he spoke. "There's one other consideration. It occurred to me while I was having tea on the weather deck yesterday after we concocted this plan. I looked down and saw that a curious fly was fluttering about in my tea! If we do this, I thought, then we'll be the fly in the teacup."

Elena looked at him, knowing he meant more with that metaphor than a simple reinforcement of Mack Morgan's warning of danger. "You mean the history," she said, giving him a look.

"Aye, the history. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think it will record that an intrepid group of men in strange garb, escorting a lovely lady, seized and commandeered a military vessel in Gibraltar, crew and all, and then high-tailed it out to sea. We're going to make waves, Elena, just like that fly fluttering in the last of my tea. We're going to change things."

Elena was silent, the words of the Prime Minister still in her mind: "*Might I advise caution while you are there. I know your Argonauts are quite effective, but a bullet in the wrong place might have some alarming repercussions. You might shoot someone's grandfather, if you fathom what I'm getting at.*"

Morgan knew enough not to say another word, for Captain MacRae had just put forward the real problem with this whole idea—contamination of the time meridian. Yes, they were going to change things. Their very presence in that year would be an anomaly, and every breath they would take would be stolen from history of 1804.

The two scouts they sent through the passage beneath St. Michael's Cave had already caused a little trouble, raising suspicion of the local constabulary and being chased into the cave as a result. They evaded further discovery, and were lucky to take the correct passage that led them to the severed rope, leading the way home. Elena had her team throw it down through the crevasse, with a lit flashlight tied to the end, all in the hope they would find it. She got lucky with that fishing expedition, but even so, one of her men came back with Yellow Fever. So there were more things to worry about than Lord Nelson, the Royal Navy, and the Barbary Pirates of the Med. They

might have an encounter—do something—that ended up creating a transformation in the history, and the Captain had finally hit a nerve.

“Now,” said Gordon. “The less we shove, the better. What’s all this talk about commandeering a ship? We could be gentlemanly, and see if we might *buy* passage east out of Gibraltar instead of trying to take a ship there by force. To my mind, the less force used, the better. Gold has a way of opening doors and gaining cooperation, doesn’t it? I’ll warrant there will be more than a few hungry sea captains there who might like to undertake a charter for wealthy patrons. Going that route eliminates all this talk of Lord Nelson, though we’d still have those Barbary Pirates to consider.”

“Good point, Gordon,” said Elena, and Morgan gave him those eyes again, for he had just solved one problem, but still threw a log on her fire.

“We’ll take along a good sum of gold....” Elena was thinking. “I didn’t think we could find coin that would be legal tender for that time period, but Mister Churchill put in a call to the Bank of England, and was able to get me a good sum in old King George III Spade Guineas issued between 1787 and 1799. They were worth a Pound back then, but in our time, they sell for as much as £1,000, so it was a very generous offer. I have some ingots in the safe here as well, just in case we need more buying power. Once we get there, we might use them to obtain more currency.”

“Gold glitters better than anything,” said MacRae.

“So we’ll be trotting about with ingots of gold in our haversacks?” Morgan was still objecting.

“It won’t take many,” said Elena. “The coinage we have should suffice. In fact, because of the threat of invasion by Napoleon, the Banks were somewhat skittish, and hoarding their coin. They issued one and two pound notes, though they were not in wide circulation. There’s no chance we could find those, so the coins the Prime Minister provided will have to do. I’ve a hundred Spade Guineas, and another twenty pounds in Shillings for our walking around money. That should do. Most people of that day might never even see a Guinea come their way. They earned five to ten shillings per week, if they were lucky, with an average annual income of no more than 20 pounds. So even a few small gold ingots would go a very long way if we need them, and for that matter, we could also take diamonds.”

“Diamonds? And where do we come by those?”

Elena smiled. “That would be telling,” she said. “One never inquires where a lady gets her diamonds, but I assure you, this lady is not without

resources.”

“Alright, alright,” said Morgan. “Supposing we can book passage, or even charter an entire ship, that act alone would be ahistorical. It might seem like an innocent cruise out to the Greek islands and back, but we’ve no way to know that. Anything could happen, and the chance that we would introduce some contamination is very high. In fact, I’d say it was inevitable. It will be 1804, the farther back you go, the greater the damage each footfall we make on that ground could do. We’ll change lives. The ship we charter was never supposed to go there, and every soul aboard will be on an altered life meridian from the moment we tip our hats at the gunwales of their ship. I find it hard to imagine that we could pull this off without introducing changes.”

“But they might only be small changes,” said Elena, “like a scratch on the skin that Time might easily heal.”

“Here we sit with an ex-*Daring* class destroyer riding roughshod all through this history,” said Morgan. “We’ve fought battles here, influenced the Atlantic convoy campaign, made that raid on Saint Nazaire, not to mention the fact that Prime Movers in this era know all about us—Churchill, Wavell, Tovey, Cunningham. God only knows what history will arise from this altered time line. Weren’t you preaching it yourself a while back? What was all that talk about some kind of Grand Finality. If that wasn’t doom and gloom, then what is? Now we’re talking about going back another 139 years! Anything we do back there could influence this time—1943—and profoundly.”

“So we’ll have to be very careful.”

“Aye, careful indeed. Here it’s loose lips, sink ships. Back there it will be one errant whisper and the whole damn world could spin off in a new direction.”

Mack Morgan was exaggerating to make his point, but then again, he wasn’t too far from the truth. One errant whisper in the ear of Sergei Kirov in 1908 had done much to change this entire world, and Morgan was also correct in wondering what the future might arise from this version of the war.

“Bottom line,” said Morgan, making his close. “This is dangerous—damn dangerous. We’ll have to ask ourselves if that key is worth the trouble. Why do we even need it? Forgive me, Mum, but aren’t we just trying to satisfy our own curiosity as to what these keys are all about. Well, curiosity killed the cat.”

“And satisfaction?” Elena gave him a wink. “Look Mack, I’m not sure I

buy the image of that fly in a teacup. I'll admit that commandeering a ship is out of the question. We'll want to be as inconspicuous as possible. If we're careful, nice and polite, I'm thinking our presence there will be more like one more fish in the sea. It's a very big world out there. We might not change anything at all if we're discrete."

"Then again," said Morgan, still the Devil's advocate. "Suppose this ship we charter does run into trouble. It might be weather, it might be pirates—god only knows. We're out to investigate the salvage operation for the wreck of the *Mentor*. Get that? The *wreck*! I'm sure Lord Elgin wanted to be very discrete himself, and spirit off his ill-gotten marbles as inconspicuously as possible. But then life is what happens to you after you make your plans, isn't it? His ship got caught in weather, ran aground, foundered on the rocks and went down with all his cargo. Alright... Suppose fate deals us a safe hand, and we play this out to get to Kythros without incident. Then what? How do we get at this Selene Horse without having to get 'pushy'?"

"I haven't thought about that yet," said Elena. "I suppose we'd still have the gold and diamonds."

"The people running this salvage operation may not be interested in selling anything, not for any amount. After all, this is all supposed to be the property of Lord Elgin. Even if they would take your offer seriously at all, they would certainly have to obtain the good Earl's permission. That would take time, and more than we have to spend there. Besides, he would certainly refuse. He wouldn't sell his precious cargo, not for any price, at least not at this time."

"Probably not. But I won't be offering to purchase. I'd merely be asking to see the wonders the good lord Elgin has secured. I could make up a story—anything. I could tell the crew I'm affiliated with the British Museum, and that after hearing of the Earl's 'acquisition' of the Marbles, I came all this way to see them first hand."

"Wasn't he touchy about his find? He kept referring to the Marbles as 'stones of no value to anyone other than Lord Elgin.' Try that line and you'll be presenting yourself as someone who knows that's a load of bullshit. The keepers of that salvage might get just a wee bit curious, and touchy. You say it was guarded night and day on that damn beach."

"True, but we only are interested in one piece—the Selene Horse. Perhaps it's in one of the eleven boxes they've already recovered. Believe me, I can be very persuasive. I'm certain I could persuade the site supervisor to let me

have one little look.”

“With a hammer and chisel?” Morgan objected immediately. “Wasn’t this key supposed to be embedded in the base? How do you suppose to get at it without doing deliberate damage to the statue?”

“Actually,” said Elena. “I was rather hoping the piece was in one of the missing boxes, still at the bottom of the sea. That’s where my Argonauts come in handy. We’re bringing along some diving equipment, very compact, but very effective. I could offer the expertise of my team, and speed along their recovery of the other boxes. They would probably be very glad about that.”

“Possibly, but the supervisor might just be a curmudgeon. He might not want us anywhere near his precious charge.”

“We’d change his mind rather quickly,” said Elena. “I’ll just send the men down to have a look. We’ll use the hand-held radar, and believe me, the first box we bring up will change their attitude considerably.”

“OK, then we’re back where we were just a moment ago. They won’t want you mucking about with a hammer and chisel.”

“They won’t even know about it.” Now Elena folded her arms. “We’ll have the men do that while they are still underwater—assuming we get lucky. We have a six in seventeen chance the Selene Horse is still submerged. If not. I’ll come up with a plan B.”

“You have to give it to her, Mack,” said Gordon. “She’s thought of everything.”

“Everything but the unexpected. No offense, Mum.”

“Don’t worry, Mack. You’re doing exactly what you should to wrangle this out with me. We’ll need to really be on our game this time. I’ll want the best men we have, expert seamen, diving experience, and good at hand-to-hand combat. No assault rifles, gentlemen. Pistols would be acceptable, but kept well hidden, and to be used only in a pinch. The last thing we would want to do is shoot anybody.”

Chapter 3

“**Most** of our Argonauts will fill that bill,” said MacRae. “A pity we just can’t take the whole ship back. Then we’d have the X3 Helos to fly about and make a real grand spectacle as well. Talk about a fly in the teacup then!”

“More like an alligator,” said Elena. “No, the ship stays here—not that we have any choice in that. We go by St. Michael’s Cave. Gordon, see to the details. The two of you are most welcome to join the team. Then we’ll need three of the best we have, and I’ll want to leave as soon as possible.”

“Very well,” said MacRae. “As to the men.... I don’t suppose you’ll want them walking about in TALOS suits.”

“Of course not. Remember, we need to be inconspicuous, or at least look like we belong where we are. Strange garb would be a dead giveaway, and arouse interest and possibly suspicion. I’ve thought about that one too. Mister Churchill mentioned it when I first proposed this idea, and he was kind enough to lend a hand. I have a trunk full of men’s clothing, authentic to the period, and all compliments of the Prime Minister. As for me, I did some shopping in London before I returned from that meeting, and found something suitable—an old Empire style dress—plain white, high waist, with a shawl and an outer hooded cape for travel. We’re about on business, and must look like upper-class merchants. But this is a minor detail. Our man came back with Yellow Fever, and Churchill told me there was a nasty epidemic there that year.”

“Yellow Fever?” said MacRae. “Nasty is half a word for that—chills, sweats, headache, jaundice, muscle spasms, bloodshot eyes and other hemorrhages, and near the end, black vomit, cold sweats and welcome death after all that suffering. You know, the place was called the filthiest post in the empire. Housing was scarce and people lived in crowded dwellings. Many thought the filth and squalor was what led to the disease, and that it was passed from person to person in the hovels. Others thought it was the result of infectious airs. The sad fact is that they were both wrong, and they never knew it was the mosquitoes. It would be another 70 years before they learned that.”

“Well, let’s make certain everyone in our team is vaccinated. Immunity after that is about 99%, and holds for life. I’ve checked my own medical records, and I’m covered. You should both do the same.”

“I’m vaccinated, and I’ve already checked over the roster to make sure all the men are as well. Mack, how about you?”

“Been in the tropics too long,” said Morgan. “I’m covered.”

“Good, because it can take a month or more after vaccination before immunity sets in.” He turned to Elena. “How long will we be there?” He had finally come to feel at home in the 1940s. Now here they were thinking to go all the way back to 1804!

“I’m thinking we’ll need at least two months.”

“That long? Well, I suppose Mister Dean can handle things on the ship for that time.”

“Oh, don’t assume we’d be gone two months’ time here. We could spend months there, and return here to find only three days have passed.”

“But our men were in there for just a few hours as they reported it, and days passed here,” said Gordon. “If that is any guide, then we could disappear for years here. The whole bloody war could be over by the time we get back to the ship—assuming we do get back.”

“That’s one of the wildcards in the deck,” said Elena. “We’ve no way of knowing how much time will pass here, but we’ll just have to risk it. Gentlemen, this is going to be a bit of an adventure!”

“Or a nightmare,” said Morgan.

* * *

They would make the descent into St. Michael’s Cave, and the climb up through the rock crevice on the very next day. It would be a team of six, Miss Fairchild, MacRae and Morgan, with three Argonauts, Sergeant Kane, and two privates, Moran and Foley. The clothing Elena brought was modified to conceal things. Special pockets were sewn in to hold necessities, and also hide them from the eyes of the people they might encounter. They wanted to take along certain military equipment, and yet keep it well hidden. Each man would also be wearing special lightweight body armor under their clothing, and sport a small holstered sidearm that would be hidden under their overcoats, and beneath a flap of material added to their waistcoat. Elena declined this, counting on her status as a dignified woman to offer her some protection.

The other side of the rock that hid the inner cavern was now lit up with rigged lighting, and they had a rope ladder fixed to the top of the stone with a

few sturdy steel pegs. Elena had not yet donned her costume clothing, wanting to get through the difficult climbing and interior passages before she did that. Then she could simply put the garb on over her traveling clothes. They would be guided by the scout they had sent in earlier, who pointed out the passage they had taken in the labyrinthine cavern.

“Both the left and right passages are dead ends. It’s the center opening there that we took. You won’t be but a hundred yards before it begins bearing up to a chimney that’s been documented for some time. It’s just wide enough to climb up, about three meters. Then you’ll be in a known passage of the cave.”

“Strange,” said Elena. “I wonder why no one ever got down here then, if it opens onto a known passage.”

“They probably did,” said Morgan. “But then never found that crevice above the rock we just climbed over.”

“But we must move through the time fissure in here somewhere—in that central passage if our scout is correct.”

“Aye,” said Morgan. “They may have as well, but seeing o way to proceed, they would have just back-tracked. The rock would seem a dead end to them, so they may have been moving in time, yet never knew about it.”

“Very strange,” said Elena. “The fissure was just hidden in plain sight. Come from our side of that rock, and it leads you back in time. Come the other way and you go forward. This is going to be interesting.”

They moved through the narrow passage, the shadows retreating from their flashlights, then gathering again behind them. Their scout had not been entirely accurate. The passages to either side of the one they took were not dead ends, though they would have seemed so to anyone not trying them with real determination. On one occasion. A British Sergeant had followed a Barbary Ape into one, and caught a glimpse of him slipping away into the rightmost passage. Pursuing, but not finding the beast anywhere, he had good reason to be persistent in his search of that tunnel, knowing that if that Ape got through, then there must be a hidden way, which he eventually found. It took him somewhere else, to a place where that printed candy bar label Elena’s team had found had originated, but none of them knew that just yet. It would not occur to Elena for some days....

It was mostly an upward hike, inclined at an angle, which then reversed its direction before they came to the brief climb up that chimney that made Elena feel something had happened to them. Once at the top, MacRae offered

her a hand, pulling her up.

“My,” she said, “I’m feeling very light headed.”

“Aye, we all felt that coming up through that chimney. There’s your time fissure. It’s right there—a three-meter climb that spans more than a century. Gives me the shivers just to think of it.”

Elena now thought it best to get in to her period clothing, feeling very cold, a physical chill to accompany the emotional frost the Captain was describing. The team was all up, and gathered into a tight group. The way forward now was known, and it would take them towards the entrance to St. Michael’s Cave, a walk of about a hundred yards. Along the way there were a few side passages, and they made mental notes of them.

“I count three,” said Morgan. “This is the Cathedral Cave.” He looked back over his shoulder. “We’ll want to bear that way on the way home. Then take the third passage on the right to the Chimney. Anyone finding it here would just think it was all a dead end. Now we know better.”

“Let’s get on with it then,” said Elena.

They moved out, with Sergeant Kane in the lead with his two Argonauts, the others following. It wasn’t long before they saw a figure ahead, and the noise of their coming roused his attention.

“Who goes there?” came a hard voice. “Come on, show yourself, unless you want a musket ball in your gut.” The man was a British soldier, a private from the lack of stripes on his sleeves.

“No need for that,” said MacRae, striding up past the Argonauts and out of the shadows. “Thank God, we’ve found the way out at last. Been in that dank cave for hours.”

“Wot’s that? Been mucking about in the cave? Folks aren’t supposed to be in there, and for just that reason. Too damn easy to get lost, or trip and fall.”

“That’s a fact,” said MacRae. Now Elena came forward, and the man seemed very surprised to see her.

“Wot? I can see your lot diggin’ about, but with a lady?”

“Forgive me, sir,” said Elena. “I pressed this adventure upon these gentlemen, and they were kind enough to escort me. It’s all my doing.”

The soldier nodded, giving her a half smile. “You must be off a ship,” he said. “Come to have a look about the Rock, are you? Well it’s not the time for it, what with the plague an all.”

“Plague?” Elena covered her mouth, looking frightened.

“You haven’t heard? Lots of folks are down with it, and better that dank cave in there than town center. If I were you, I’d get right back aboard the ship that brought you here, and stay there. Otherwise you’re likely to catch your death here.”

“Aye,” said MacRae. “We were warned, but the lady wanted to see the caves, and so...” he nodded, giving the man a wink.

“Look here,” said the soldier. “On your way now, but don’t say nothin’ to my officer if he comes upon you. He’ll berate me for an hour if he thinks I was slack in me watch.”

“Don’t worry,” said Elena. “You are too kind. Our touring being done, we’ve business with the Naval Officer and Storekeeper. Where might we find him?”

“Offices in town,” said the man. “But remember what I said. It’s no place for a lady there with all that suffering. There be bodies in the streets, Mum. You’d be better off back aboard ship.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Elena. “I’ll send these gentlemen in my place.” Seeing his advice well heeded, the soldier nodded, giving her a friendly smile.

They were on their way, and later learned that the man they wanted to see was in the Garrison Library that morning, off Gunner’s Parade, and down a lane past the Boyd Building. That place had been named for Lieutenant General Sir Robert Boyd, the late Governor of Gibraltar, who had died in 1794, his remains embedded in the concrete and stone beneath the King’s Bastion on the western shore near the harbor.

“A mister Edward Pownall?” MacRae inquired when they finally reached the library, past scenes of distress and squalor that they had been warned about by the soldier.

“Mister Pownall? Yes, he’s here, retrieving some records. Might I help you gentlemen?”

“Gordon MacRae,” said the Captain. “We’re looking to book passage to Malta.”

“James Cutworth,” said the man. “I’m an Agent Victualler with business there on occasion. Why on earth are you headed there?”

“Her Ladyship will be touring the Greek Islands, and we thought to find passage from there once we arrive.”

The man eyed Elena, who smiled. “May I have the pleasure,” he said, extending his hand with a bow, which Elena took briefly, smiling. “James

Cutworth.”

“Miss Elena Fairchild, house of Fairchild out of England. Mister Cutworth, do say you can be of assistance. Might I find passage to Malta for myself and these gentlemen at a convenient time?”

“Passage to Malta... Well now.” Cutworth seemed to be thinking, his head inclined. “What have we at hand that might fill the bill. A number of transports are in port this morning, *Thetis*, *Latona*, *Nestor*, *Lady Shaw Stewart*. Those last two will be bound for Malta later today, as soon as the *Sophie* returns from Lisbon, with some hemp and rope they must convey along with other stores for the Navy. I suppose you might get passage on one or the other. Then there’s the Portuguese merchantman, the *Lassa*. That came in with HMS *Medusa* this morning as well. You’ll want to see Mister Wilkie down at the Harbor. Those transports I mentioned have goods under his charge.”

“Why, thank you, sir,” said Elena. “You are most gracious. Then I expect we shan’t need the services of Mister Pownall after all. Do you think Mister Wilkie can accommodate my party? It’s rather dreadful here at the moment, and the sooner I get out to sea, the better.”

“I understand, M’lady. Yes, dreadful business here with the fever on so many folks and all. That would be wise. Were you off a ship this morning?”

“We came from landward, after touring Spain,” said MacRae. They had determined that would be a safer story, as most ships would have records of travelers booked, and there was no need to leave questions in their wake.

“Well Mister Wilkie can be most accommodating,” said Cutworth.

And he was.

Elena knew that one of the transports Cutworth had mentioned, *The Lady Shaw Stewart*, was the ship they wanted. That had been the transport Lord Nelson sent to the very island they needed to reach, to pick up the Marbles for Lord Elgin and bring them first back to Malta before arranging further passage to England.

As they made their way to the harbor to find Mister Wilkie, Elena began to think they were very late. She had asked Mister Cutworth what day it was. “My, I’ve simply lost track of the time with all the sightseeing. But Gibraltar was not at all what I expected,” she said. “Pray tell... What day is this?”

“The 28th of August, M’lady. And thank God, the fever seems to be abating here now, but we’ve had a fearful loss. Over 800 died, and that was just in the Army garrison. The civilians took far worse. Nearly a third of the

15,000 or so have perished. You certainly won't want to linger on here. A pity you had to see this."

"All the more reason for us to be on our way."

They were very late. Elena knew from her research on these events that the divers contracted to recover the lost cases of marbles had returned in April of 1804 to begin looking for those that were still unrecovered. On June 9th, they would locate and retrieve the 16th case, and then continue searching for the "marble chair" that was the Throne of Prytanis. *Lady Shaw Stewart* would be sent to the island, but the marbles would not be loaded until the 16th of February 1805.

Elena had also dug up the dispatches of Lord Nelson, scouring them to determine when he might have given orders for that ship to proceed to the island. She found the very letter that Nelson had dictated to Captain Charles Marsh Schomberg, HMS *Madras*, instructing him to see that a transport was sent to the island for Lord Elgin. That letter would be written in just a few days, on the 2nd of September 1804. That transport would be #99, *Lady Shaw Stewart*, which would sail with the schooner *Renard* to complete the task of retrieving the Marbles of Lord Elgin.

What would take place in that interval, between September of 1804 and February of 1805 when the Marbles were finally loaded on the *Lady Shaw Stewart*? It was one of those grey zones that make up so very much of the history, for 99.9% of everything that really happened remained unrecorded.

That was where they were headed, on the very ship that they needed to board, the *Lady Shaw Stewart*. It would sail off that very day, and with six new passengers aboard bound for Malta—off into the grey mist that no eyes in modern times had ever penetrated. No one really knew what had happened with the ship in that five-month interval, but they were about to find out.

Part II

Operation Chariot

“Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms, and with thee I will destroy the horse and rider.”

—Jeremiah 51:20-21

Chapter 4

“Time for the main event,” said Montgomery, taking the podium. “The rains have finally relented, and the ground is much better. Now it’s time for the final big push. We’ll want to go all the way to Tunis and Bizerte this time.”

“Here, here,” said O’Connor. “Sorry we’re a bit late, but Alexander pilfered 1st and 7th Armored from me, and Jerry can be stubborn when he wants to.”

“We all know that,” said Monty. “Progress up the coast has been hammer and tongs, but they’ve retreated to Cape Rosa, and we think another good push will move them again. The real news is that they’ve had to pull out their 10th Panzer Division and move it to Le Kef opposite General Patton’s new position. That means my 6th and 10th Armored Divisions can double team the Hermann Goring outfit, and we’ve been further reinforced on the right with the arrival of 4th Infantry. The new Army boundary line is the Mellegue River, flowing from Souk el Arba south, to pass Le Kef to the east of that town. Seeing as though the American 3rd Infantry Division is still west of that line, General Eisenhower has graciously put it under my command.”

“A good outfit,” said Patton.

“Yes, well let’s hope so. The 34th has had some difficulty, but then we all have. In any case, Souk el Arba is my number one objective, and I plan to drive right up Highway 6. When I get there, I can send a group north towards the coast at Tabarka to unhinge any further defense west of that position.”

“And then your entire northern corps will finally be inside Tunisia,” said Patton with a smile. Montgomery had been slugging it out with two German infantry divisions for months.

“Well, I’m afraid the going along the coast only gets tougher as we approach the Tunisian border just east of Tabarka. We’ll be up off the marshy plain and there will be rugged country in front of us again.” Montgomery indicated the mountains on the wall map with his pointer. “That’s why we’re counting heavily on the inland push from my armor, and that’s why you’ve moved your two armored divisions to the center as well. Now then.... Once I take Souk al Arba, I’ll push right on through to Bedja as my next objective. General Patton, your 2nd Armored Division will push them out of Le Kef,

and then drive right up Highway 5. Your 1st Armored will be moving parallel to that advance up the main rail line to Tunis, and hopefully, the two divisions can meet here—at Medjez al Bab. I should be at Bedja by then, and I'll push on through Sidi N'sir to Mateur, which will put me right on the doorstep of Bizerte. You'll continue right up Highway 5 to Tunis."

"A good plan," said Eisenhower. "We'll have four armored divisions hitched to the chariot, and intelligence has indicated they'll be short one panzer division. The Russians kicked up quite a stir near Kharkov last month, and the Germans look to be building up for a big counteroffensive in that region. That means Hitler has been forced to make a few margin calls. They've withdrawn their 7th Panzer Division to Tunis, and it's already been shipping personnel back to Sicily. The tanks were distributed to the other four panzer divisions here to replace losses. Our interdiction efforts will be ramping up. We want to prevent any further transfer of units here back to Italy with increased naval pressure in Operation Retribution. I believe Admiral Cunningham said it very well with the message he transmitted to his Captains: 'Sink, burn, destroy. Let nothing pass.'"

"Now that's a man with my kind of eloquence," said Patton. "But Ike, don't you worry. We'll get to Tunis alright. My men are razors now. They'll get the job done. So what's this big push going to be called? I rather like the phrase Ike coined—four armored divisions hitched to our chariot. Since we called the last one Gladiator, why not call this one Operation Chariot?"

There were nods all around the room, and Montgomery spoke up. "We were going to call it Operation Vulcan, but I rather like that, General Patton. Chariot it is. If we keep those four horses abreast of one another, they won't be able to stop us."

"What about us laggards on the east coast?" said O'Connor.

"Ah, yes Richie," said Monty. "We'll want you to keep up strong pressure there. The Germans have moved both their 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions onto the line in that sector, so your job is to keep them there, and prevent them from reinforcing their center. The same can be said for General Truscott's Corps—unrelenting pressure. Gentlemen, this one is for the prize. We plan on kicking everything off on May Day, 06:00 hours."

"Good," said Patton. "That will give me the whole day to get to Medjez Al Bab." That got laughs, but General Bradley leaned in and spoke quietly to Patton.

"George, I almost think you meant that."

Patton just smiled.

* * *

Eisenhower's intelligence briefing was right on the money. The Germans had moved all 7th Panzer personnel to Italy, with plans to ship the unit directly to Germany. There they were to receive all new equipment; one of four panzer divisions now being upgraded in the homeland. The margin call would also fall on Rommel and Guderian. Hitler could see that further operations aimed at Egypt would not succeed unless Rommel was strongly reinforced, and he was simply not prepared to do that. His favorite general had kept his promise, but he looked at the photograph of the Nazi war flag flying over the ruin of the Parliament building in Damascus, and said nothing. He was in Damascus, but the Führer knew he could not leave Rommel there, nor could he support him with more panzers.

He sent word asking Rommel to fly directly to OKW Headquarters, and planned to break the news to him there, and with the offer of yet another new post. "Herr Rommel," he said. "You have done what I asked of you, only this time, I cannot support you further. I wanted you to hear this from me directly, for I must ask you to send me back the *Wiking* SS Division. It is needed on the *Ostfront*."

"That is my strongest division," said Rommel. "What am I to do in Damascus without it?"

"Nothing," said Hitler. "You will not get to Egypt through Damascus and Jerusalem. So what is the point of leaving your forces at Damascus? I am usually most reluctant to give the enemy back ground our soldiers have won with steel and blood, but in this case, I may have to withdraw all the panzer divisions from Syria. Do you realize that the Soviets had an army across the Donets last month? We pushed them back, and now we must push harder. There are big things in the offing, and I have a new assignment for you."

"On the *Ostfront*?"

"No, I want you to rest first. You had too little time after Tunisia, so take at least a full month. Then, I would like you to assume command of all forces in the continental west, France, Belgium, the Low Countries, and even Norway. Italy and Tunisia I leave to Kesselring, but all the rest is yours."

"I see..." said Rommel quietly. "So, the old warhorse is being put out to pasture at last."

“What? Not at all, Herr Rommel. Not at all. I neglected to include Germany in that list. Yes, you will oversee all divisions presently building and refitting in the homeland, and that now includes the entire 24th Panzer Korps, and your old favorite, the 7th Panzer Division as well. I want you to go directly to the factories and inspect the assembly operations for our new tanks. See that they are built correctly, Rommel. You are the man for that now, as Guderian is still in Iraq. On that score, do not think I dismember your command in Syria alone. I have had to ask the same of General Guderian. The Brandenburg Division is also being recalled, and I want you to personally direct the refit of that division back to a full Panzer division, and with all our best new tanks. All of this is in your capable hands. I am trusting you to build me these strong reserves, because believe me, we will need them, and soon.”

“What happened to all the divisions Himmler promised you?”

“They are still fitting out, and training the men. Those will be yours to command as well. Some have gone to Armeegruppe Nord, but the 9th, 10th and 12th SS Panzer Divisions are still in France and Germany. And that is not all. As you may know, I have ordered the O.T. to improve coastal defenses all along the Atlantic and Norwegian Seas. That, too, will be your charge. The *Organisation Todt* will continue building my Festung Europa under your personal direction. I want you to improve all the defenses—strongpoints, minefields, gun emplacements, everything. Give particular attention to the Channel Coast at Calais and Boulogne. We have picked up intelligence that the British and Americans may be planning an early attack there. Then I want you to select units from those under your command and build me two Panzerkorps for the defense of the West. One will be this new II SS Korps with Himmler’s three Divisions. You may build the second using any of the panzer divisions refitting at home.”

“Very well,” said Rommel. “That is at least better than sitting in the Syrian desert twiddling my thumbs. But now it seems that General Guderian will not get to Abadan as planned.”

“We don’t need it,” said Hitler. “If he can take it, all the better, but with Baba Gurgur in the north, and control of both Maykop and Groznyy, we now have access to plenty of oil. The danger now is in the east. We must knock the Soviets out of the war this year, and to do so, we will have to go to Leningrad. I will need every division available—all the panzer divisions presently assigned to Syria, and probably Guderian’s 3rd and 4th Panzer

Divisions as well. Infantry can take up a defensive posture there. I made good use of the time in the last winter months, but now the war on the *Ostfront* is heating up again. Understand?”

“Of course,” said Rommel, and now he no longer felt like that old lost warhorse being put out to pasture. Not quite yet, he thought. The Führer wants to make a plow horse out of me first, and till all the fields of France and the Low Countries, because things are not going well in Tunisia. And Guderian will never see the Persian Gulf. He might be able to hold Baghdad, just as I could have sat in Damascus if I really wanted to stay there. Yet Hitler is correct. The Soviet Army is the real threat now, and it simply must be defeated. Perhaps I may get a position on the *Ostfront* one day, but for now, I am tired, and time at home sounds like the best medicine. My doctor will certainly be pleased to hear this, as will my darling Lucy.

But something tells me that I will not be building those coastal fortifications without good reason....

* * *

The offensive in Tunisia would kick off on May 1st as planned, an unrelenting wave of force all along the front, which now stretched like a great shield from the northern coast, to that in the east near Enfidaville. Even though the German lines had been compressed, they were now missing 7th Panzer Division. The strong defense that had been put up earlier by the Hermann Goring Division standing with 10th Panzer was now diluted when the 10th Division had to be broken up into three *kampfgruppen* to backstop the infantry front. This left the Hermann Goring Division alone to face the onslaught of Montgomery’s 6th and 10th Armored Divisions, with two infantry divisions in support. It simply could not hold in the face of that attack, though it put up a dogged defense.

Further east, the Italians had retreated up the coast, their best units at Enfidaville, but the inland segments of that line had to be held by the German 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The 90th and 164th Light Divisions joined the German 334th in the more rugged country between the coastal plain in the east and Highways 4 and 5, and only those scattered KGs of the 10th Panzer stood as a reserve. As the allies pushed down their assigned roads, it was like a series of hammer blows on that German shield, which was soon being battered to the breaking point. The four horses hitched to that chariot were

going to be too much to stop.

On the north coast, the British 3rd Division would push from Cape Rosa to Tebarka, driving the infantry of the 15th Division back over a five-day battle. Monty's tanks would surge up Highway 6 after the Goring Division broke and fell back, and he had Souk al Arba by May 5th. Patton took Le Kef against strong resistance from the well-rested 334th Infantry Division, backed up by Tiger companies and one KG of 10th Panzer. His advance up Highway 5 was not the dramatic breakthrough and dash for Medjez al Bab that he had hoped for, but a grueling slog. The Germans would only give him ground when absolutely necessary, and managed to maintain a cohesive defense for five days. On the 7th of May, he had finally reached Le Krib, which was still 65 kilometers from his primary objective, much to Montgomery's delight. His tanks were flanking the last blocking positions of the Hermann Goring Division around Sidi Ahmed and Souk el Khemis, and were now only 15 kilometers from Bedja.

In O'Connor's sector, the 8th Army threw its shoulder against the coastal defenses of the Italian Trento Motorized Division, supported by a company of German Tigers. He was using his old one two punch, the 51st Highland Division, with the strong 23rd Armored Brigade as its battering ram. These forces advanced from Sousse towards Enfidaville, and by May 7th, they finally made a dramatic breakthrough there when the French brought up their 3rd Algerian Division to make a pinning attack, and occupy 15th Panzer Division to keep it out of O'Connor's fight.

In the center, Truscott's Corps had the 1st, 34th and 45th Infantry Divisions, with the 82nd Airborne in reserve. It would be faced off by the German 90th and 164th Light Divisions, which found themselves outnumbered by more than two to one. Truscott also had strong support from the 1st Tank Destroyer group, and he used those fast-moving M-10's to exploit small breakthroughs as if they were armor. Little by little, he was pushing up Highway 4, and was even able to outpace Patton, where the Germans put up their strongest defense. By May 7th, however, the German shield was splintered and broken in several places, and Kesselring convened a meeting with Nehring and von Arnim to discuss the situation.

Chapter 5

“A fine mess,” he began. “We finally shorten our lines to a point where I think we can hold, and now they are simply overwhelming us with mass. Montgomery has five divisions in the north, the Americans eight in the center, and O’Connor has five more on the eastern plain. That has put eighteen enemy divisions against nine German and three Italian divisions on the line. It’s become one crisis after another.”

“I do not think we can hold for much longer,” said von Arnim. “The Hermann Goring Division is down to 50% of its nominal strength. 10th Panzer is scattered all over the front. We’ve nothing we can use to counterattack.”

“It was a mistake to put the 15th and 21st Panzers on the front line,” said Kesselring.

“It could not be helped,” said Nehring. “Do you think the Italians would have held that front for even three days?”

“Trento Division fought well.”

“That was the best of them, but now O’Connor is breaking through at Enfidaville. Losing the men of 7th Panzer was a big loss. What has Hitler sent us in return?”

“Practically nothing gets through these days,” said Kesselring. “They are bombing us night and day now in the straits off Sicily. All we can do is make small deliveries of ammunition and supplies by submarine, or destroyer runs. Putting a transport convoy there is virtually suicide for those ships now.”

“And you know what that means,” said von Arnim. “Everything we have here is going to be lost. We can’t get back to Sicily under these conditions. It’s well beyond the time when we should have done that. Manteuffel was fortunate he got 7th Panzer out, even though he left all his tanks here to die with us.”

“We still have some fight in us,” said Kesselring.

“Yes,” said von Arnim sullenly. “We are Festung Tunis now, eh? Well that will end like all the rest—Festung Gibraltar, Festung Canaria, Algiers, Oran. Tunis will be no different. I give us two weeks at best.”

“Where is your line now?”

“It’s anchored just east of Tebarka on the north coast, and then runs

through the hills to Bedja, which is screened now by nothing more than the Marsch Battalions. Goring's division is wrecked, but I have a Kampfgruppe from 10th Panzer behind that line at Bedja. If Montgomery takes that, then he can either go right up the rail line to Mateur, or swing southwest to Medjez al Bab."

"I think that is where he will go."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because Highway 5 leads right to that town, and that is Patton's road. Montgomery would like nothing more than to beat Patton to Medjez al Bab."

"Well, that seems likely," said von Arnim. "I put most of my available Tigers into the Highway 5 defense. They've been giving Patton fits, I'm sure."

"Well, you must still do what you can to slow Montgomery down. General Nehring, any good news from you?"

"Only that there's another breakthrough east of Highway 4 now, and I have nothing to send."

"Isn't the Italian Superga Mountain Division there?"

"For what it's worth."

"Then support them with the 164th."

"Herr Feldmarschall, the 164th is gone. They were understrength when this all began, and still they fought like the Tigers, but the division is gone. I could not even scrape together a regimental Kampfgruppe from what's left of them."

"Then I think you must maneuver now," Kesselring said definitively. "You'll have to pull 15th and 21st Panzers together. They are our last effective mobile force."

"Yes? And what do you want me to do with them?" Nehring was not optimistic.

"Use the Italians for fodder and see if they can delay on the coastal plain. Move your own HQ to Pont du Fahs. Highways 3 and 4 meet there. Then pull out your mobile divisions and screen that junction along this line of hills. But keep a tight fist."

"O'Connor will just push right up Highway 1 on the coast," said Nehring.

"Yes, but the Italians have been nursing their Centauro and Littorio Armored Divisions there."

"You can't rightfully call those divisions," said Nehring. "They are little more than brigade strength units."

“They will have to do,” said Kesselring. “At the very least, they may buy us a few days’ time. Have the Trento Division fall back to their position at Bou Fiche on the coast. I want your panzers off the line and ready to counterpunch in either direction. If O’Connor gets up the coast too fast, strike to cut him off. Do the same if the Americans get too far up Highway 4.”

“They are already in the hills east of that route with infantry. I’ve had to use a rail construction company to try and block a secondary road!”

“Yes, but they’ll have to take Pont du Fahs. One way or another, you’ll meet them there. Alright, I’m going to OKW to let them know what we’re facing.”

“What good will that do?” said von Arnim. “We can’t get out by sea.”

“No, but Goring still has a lot of transport planes. We might be able to try some night airlift operations with Auntie JU, and save some of our better troops to fight in Sicily.”

“Good luck convincing Hitler to permit that,” said Von Arnim.

“Well, it is only a matter of time before it becomes our only option. I plan on speaking directly with the *Reichsmarschall*. He’s about to see his pet division chewed up by Montgomery. Nothing can be done about the equipment, but perhaps saving a few good officers and the better troops would make it easier to rebuild that division in Italy. Let’s see if he has the backbone to do something, even if Hitler orders otherwise.”

“I wish there was something we could send,” said von Arnim. “Conrath has virtually nothing left in that division—the pioneers, artillery, and a few companies of infantry and panzers.”

“Better than nothing,” said Kesselring, always the optimist.

* * *

O’Connor was listening in the late evening, and the sound of the bagpipes echoing in the distant vale made him glad. It was, of course, his 51st Highland Division, advancing again up the coast from Sousse towards Enfidaville. The Italians had been making a steady retreat behind a rearguard put up by the 80th La Spezia Division.

My, he thought, how things change. Rommel vanished, and he took all the panzer divisions with him. They went off to fight against the Americans. Then those last two German infantry divisions pulled out, and the whole Italian line went pear shaped. I’m advancing faster now than I did when I had

Briggs and Horrocks with me. Both those divisions have Rommel by the horns in Syria now, and damn if the old Fox hasn't run all the way to Baghdad. So that leaves me the job of tidying up southern Tunisia, and pushing the Italians on up the road until I can link up with the French, Americans, and British. I'll be a bit late to the party, but I expect they'll be glad to see me.

If Kinlan were here, I would have gone right through that line at Mareth, Rommel or no Rommel. Those were the glory days, when I could send in the thunder of that heavy brigade and smash right on through any defense the Germans could devise. Amazing what war becomes as the years roll on. I only wish I could live to see it. That was a sad fate Kinlan suffered at Tobruk.... But God almighty, that was no ammo ship explosion. It was one of those secret weapons the Russians spoke of once. Is that how they fight their battles now in Kinlan's day? There's no honor in that; no gallantry, and no amount of stiff upper lip on the field of battle makes a hair's breadth difference.

Perhaps its best I fight my war here, now, and with the weapons and soldiers of our own time. I wonder how we might have fared if Kinlan had not come blundering into Rommel's flank at Bir El Khamsa? The Desert Fox had us on the run, didn't he? He might have run all the way to Cairo, just as he boasted. And yet, the terrain favored us with each additional mile we lost. The Qattara Depression acted like a great stone funnel, narrowing the front as you move towards Alexandria. We would have picked a good spot in there somewhere to make a stand... Perhaps at El Alamein. Could we hold?

Thinking these things was useless, he knew. That was all history, but he wondered if future generations would ever know the whole story; the real truth, of how the British stopped Rommel at Bir el Khamsa, and how they really held Tobruk when the Desert Fox came knocking. Would they ever truly know exactly why the British Army finally pushed Rommel off his defensive front at Gazala?

After that, he thought, it's all mine. Kinlan was gone, on his way to that horrible doom at Tobruk, and I was the man who hammered on Rommel at El Agheila. I was the man who held the line at Mersa Brega, and the man who pushed him back through Sirte to Tripoli. Oh, we got a black eye and broken nose for our trouble. But look here, it's my 51st Highlanders pushing on up the road this evening, and the sound of those pipes tells that tale well enough.

Rommel is gone, beaten at his own game by that firebrand American

General Patton. Now he's in Syria tormenting General Alexander. Old reliable Wavell is gone too, off to sit as the Viceroy of all India. Monty's got his finger in the pie up north, but I'm told he's been stuck on the coast for months. So I've got to get on up there and sort things out. I've only the 23rd Armored Brigade left for a good heavy punch, and I managed to squirrel away some 400 tanks in that outfit. My infantry is second to none, and now I have the room to organize a proper offensive. I'm going to push hard, and by God, perhaps I'll beat Monty to Tunis.

There came the distant sound of artillery, and he knew it was 25-pounders. The lads have found someone to get after this evening, he thought. Good for them. He leaned forward, tapping the driver's shoulder with a smile on his face. "Come on, Johnny, let's not miss the show."

"Right, sir."

* * *

General Buschenhagen of the 15th Infantry Division was waiting for a train from Tunis promising supplies. His men had been in action on the coast, fighting a stubborn withdrawal for months. They would fall back, dig in, hold the line until it was flanked inland, and then withdraw to the next position to the rear. He was sitting in his staff car by the rail line, his men enjoying a quiet smoke in the evening, waiting on that train, but it was very late.

"Sergeant," he waved at a nearby man. "Send some men on motorcycles down the line and see what the problem is with this train, it is already an hour overdue."

It was traveling at night, deliberately trying to avoid the attention of Allied night fighters, but they may have seen it. What he found out two hours later was even more alarming. British commandos had landed at dusk along the coast behind his lines. All the Marsch Battalions that had once been posted to coastwatcher duty had long ago been commandeered and sent into the fight near Bedja.

"How strong are they?"

"We saw what looked like battalion sized formations at two locations, in the old forts near Sidi Bermaga, and along the river coming down from Djebel Abiod."

The General was not happy.... There were actually four Commandos that had put to sea out of Bone that evening, and they had already worked their way well inland. In effect, the General's lines of communication back to

Tunis had just been cut, and there would be no train arriving that night. The engine and two stock cars were derailed and burning in the otherwise quiet night along the coast.

* * *

If only to make himself feel that he did still have some fight in him. Nehring waited at Pont du Fahs to see which front would need his divisions. As it turned out, the open zone north of Enfidaville was much easier for O'Connor than the high country east of Highway 4. So on May 8th, he organized a counterattack, with all of 15th Panzer and most of 21st, save a small KG that he had to send to Highway 4. It hit elements of the French 3rd Algerian, battalions of US Rangers that had landed on the coast to flank Enfidaville two days earlier, and a battalion of the British 44th Home Counties Division, causing some disruption and driving to within 10 kilometers of Enfidaville again. At this time, the main effort with 51st Highland and 23rd Armor was already 18 kilometers north of the town, where the Italians attempted to keep them, by launching an attack with their Centauro and Littorio Armored brigades.

O'Connor could hear the German attack coming his way at Enfidaville, and looked to see what he had at hand to stop it. The 8th RTR was still there after mopping up some trapped units of the Trento Division, and it had about 70 tanks. He also had 1st and 7th Gordons, and all the division artillery from the 51st. So he immediately ordered those guns into action, and then sent those three battalions northwest to meet the German advance. As this counterattack developed, the remainder of the French 3rd Algerian came up Highway 2 where it joined the coast near the town, and they were able to get organized to quickly join the fight. Then O'Connor heard a distant rumble to his left, and knew that the guns of the 44th Home Counties Division had joined the action.

The Germans had thought to take the British 8th Army unawares, but O'Connor found he had ample resources to deal with the enemy attack. He also knew from dispatches that the American attack up Highway 4 was gathering steam, and might soon threaten to break out towards Pont du Fahs, so he was not concerned about the sudden German thrust. They're making a good play, if they can, he thought, but we'll stop them.

That attack by the US 45th Infantry Division was now the right pincer of

what looked like an envelopment operation aimed at Pont du Fahs. The left Pincer was Monty pushing hard with 6th and 10th Armored for Bedja. Between them, the Germans had their most cohesive defensive line, with 334th, 337th and 90th Infantry Divisions, all backed by Tiger companies and KGs from 10th Panzer. That force had held off Patton's 1st and 2nd Armored Divisions for days along Highway 5, but it was now being flanked on both sides along highways 4 and 6.

Nehring had no choice. He had to suspend his attack and reform a defensive line, but in doing so, he managed to extricate three battalions of Panzergrenadiers and two Panzer companies to form a regimental sized reserve Kampfgruppe. It would now stand as the only German mobile troops that were not on the line, and it would not be long before they would be needed elsewhere. One detachment was sent along the rail line from Tunis, west to Bou Arada. The second went to Medjez al Bab, the last remained at Pont Du Fahs.

As they started on their way, General von Bismarck wished them good luck. For a moment he thought of Rommel, wondering how his old commanding General was faring. Gone were the long days and nights in the Libyan Desert, and the hope that they had all carried west into Tunisia had vanished after Kasserine. He shook his head, sullen and dispirited. If Hitler allowed the British and Americans to run us out of North Africa like this, then the war was as good as lost. We had over 200 divisions on the *Ostfront*, and could spare only ten here. Why in God's name did Hitler order Raeder into the Black Sea? The Sicilian Narrows were our life line to Tunis, and now getting supplies through is like trying to squeeze water out of a dry sponge. There goes the last of my mobile reserves.

Farewell, my soldiers. I expect we will all soon meet again at Tunis.

Chapter 6

Monty had Bedja on the 11th of May, and was now endeavoring to do exactly what Kesselring had predicted. He wanted to continue right up Highway 6 to Medjez al Bab, and he was using his tank battalions like battering rams against the enemy defense, smashing forward with one, then sending in another. The Germans were throwing everything they had in front of him, even HQ staff companies and support squads, but by the 12th of May the line was battered to the breaking point.

On Highway 5 as it approached the village of Testour, Patton had his 2nd Armored pushing with the 3rd Infantry division, now returned to his command by Montgomery. The British General had more forces than he could use, and his own 4th Infantry had been squeezed out of the line, waiting in reserve for the armor to make some decisive breakthrough.

For that, Monty and Patton were neck and neck, with both Highway 5 and 6 converging on Medjez al Bab, bringing their spearhead forces to a meeting point. In hard fighting, the Germans were forced to retreat towards the city, cobbling together another defensive line as they did so. When Patton learned that British troops were just a few kilometers north of “His” road, Highway 5, he deliberately barked an order at the commander of CCR of 2nd Armored.

“Get up there and give them your left shoulder. Montgomery isn’t going to horn in on my road to Tunis. Let him find his own way there.”

Angered at what he saw as Patton’s “impudence,” Montgomery ordered three battalions of tanks to swing over the open country just south of Highway 6, where they pushed back a thin screen of Tigers and raced for the city. The Germans had seven AP rounds left, in a company of an equal number of tanks, and were little more than ominous looking mobile pill boxes now, their machineguns being the only real weapon they could use. So by dusk that day, elements of 8th and 10th Armored Brigades of the 10th Division were just outside Medjez al Bab.

Not to be outdone, Patton ordered the Armored Cavalry tanks of CCA’s, 2nd Armored, to race past an outlying fort still held by the Germans, and get to Medjez al Bab come hell or high water. They would face a little of both as they advanced. First a red face British Lieutenant from 3rd RTR was spitting

invectives at the troops of light M5s when they scooted right in front of his own tanks forming up for the attack.

“Look,” shouted an American Sergeant. “You’re sitting there in our goddamned Grants and Shermans. We thought you were ours, and it’s our job to scout ahead of the medium armor.” That was a convenient lie, but it was already too late to do anything much about the incident. The American Stuarts, like the old swashbuckling cavalry officer they were named for, were already in the van. “Come on after us,” shouted the Sergeant. “We’ll show you the way.” Then he whistled, rapped on the top of his M5, and it sped off in a cloud of dust.

“Bloody Americans,” said the Lieutenant. “Thought we were yours, is it? Where were you in ’41 when we had the whole war on our shoulders. Come on lads, get after them!”

It wasn’t entirely clear who the British tanks were supposed to “get after” with that order, the upstart Americans or the Germans.

The American M5’s overran the airfield near Medjez al Bab, but the Germans were deeply nested in the city, about 2 kilometers to the east. To their north, the British 43rd RTR was right on the finish line with the Americans, nose to nose. Both sides had reached the town at the same time, but neither had taken it. The British were breaking through to the north, and the US 2nd Armored was pushing past the town to the south, heading for the old Roman Road that led directly to Tunis, no more than 60 kilometers to the northeast.

The Germans held on to Medjez al Bab until the 16th of May. On the 17th Montgomery was organizing one final blow, massing his artillery to pound the city, when 2nd Armored broke through the crumbling German resistance to the south, and raced up the old Roman Road. They went all the way to Bourg Amri, the headquarters of General von Arnim, the mass of the column so great that the General took one look at it, and then sent a messenger out to seek terms. Tanks, halftracks and other vehicles were grinding past the airfield to the north and south even as he surrendered.

That breakthrough by Hell on Wheels was the decisive moment of the campaign, wide and deep on either side of the Old Roman Road. Its spearheads would find themselves no more than ten kilometers from Tunis on the night of the 17th of May, effectively cutting off Nehring’s entire command to the south. Patton was elated.

“While old Montgomery is lining up his guns to pound Medjez al Bab,

my boys went right for the jugular—right down the road to Tunis. I told you I would beat that ‘gentleman’ to the punch. Now’ we’ll have those two panzer divisions south of the city in a vise, and I intend to squeeze them.”

The hour was lost.

The British 43rd Wessex Division had also pushed through an unguarded hole north of Medjez al Bab, and was driving on Bizerte, taking the vital road and rail junction at Mateur. This would cut off the 327th and 15th Infantry on the northern coast, and they now began a hasty retreat to Bizerte. General Conrath, his division largely destroyed, fled as fast as he could to that city, thinking to get himself to Sicily on a plane.

Walther Nehring had other ideas. He had been trying to get through to von Arnim on the telephone, but the lines were suddenly cut. Kesselring was in Berlin, and though Nehring did not yet know it, he was now the senior Commanding officer on the field in Tunisia. News quickly claimed that the Americans had broken through and were on the old road to Tunis, which set Nehring in motion.

His 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions had been holding the line in the south, and with the support of several Italian divisions, they had managed to stop O’Connor’s drive up the coast. Nehring knew the end was near. But he still had a fairly cohesive force, and a reputation that was already under the shadow of Hitler’s criticism. Some back home had labeled him a defeatist, so he decided that if this battle would be lost, he would try and redeem himself with one last counterattack.

Nehring got to a telegraph station and sent off a signal to Berlin. *“Unable to communicate with v.Arnim. Americans breaking through to Tunis. My Korps now moving to counterattack. – Nehring.”*

The remnants of the once proud 5th Panzer Army would move north that night, a long march that would bring them to the village and airfield of Oudua, about 18 kilometers south of Tunis. When Nehring got there, he saw the last of the planes forming up on the airfield to flee from the scene. An aide ran to him.

“Herr general! There is room on that transport. It will take you to Sicily.”

Nehring could already hear the artillery of 15th Panzer opening fire on the forward flank of the American penetration around Bour Amri. “No,” he said. “My men are fighting, and so I stay here and fight with them. You go in my place, Hans. Get to OKW—that is an order—and tell them that General Walther Nehring fought with his Korps to the last.”

The man was shocked, but saluted stiffly, and then ran off into the growing chaos on the airfield. As dawn broke, a flight of three American fighters came swooping down and began strafing the field, and his plane would never get off the ground. Three planes exploded, sending dark acrid smoke up into the grey dawn, and the bright hot orange fire of the aviation fuel lit up the field.

The Germans would find 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment and give it a bruising wallop that morning, along with Company A, 1/66th Cavalry in the 2nd Armored Division. It was the last German counterattack on anything approaching a division scale level of the war in North Africa.

Just a few brief months ago, five German Panzer divisions had surged against the American lines, driving through Faid Pass to Kasserine, and on to Tebessa, where they were finally stopped by Terry Allen's 1st Infantry Division, General George Patton, and a lot of guts. After that, the dark rain fell heavily on Rommel's command car, and he was soon gone, off for one last gallant ride through the Syrian desert to Damascus.

The men he had fought with, von Bismarck, Fischer, Randow, von Arnim and so many others, would all soon come to the bitter end in Tunisia. Walther Nehring had never been fated to be captured there, having been posted to the *Ostfront* before this happened. This time, his determination to go down fighting would see him join von Arnim in an Allied prison camp for the duration of the war. That last attack, which would soon be countered by CCA of 2nd Armored, would be known as the 'Battle of Morraghia' the deepest penetration the Germans made on the flank of Patton's drive. It would end at the Old Roman Road, the thoroughfare of another conquering army, so very long ago.

* * *

When Hitler received the news of the sudden collapse of the entire northern front in Tunisia, he went into a rage. Kesselring was there at the time, trying to convey the urgency of the situation in Tunisia, but to Hitler, the lines noting positions on the map were all he could see. The Hermann Goring Division was still on its front line, but Hitler did not know it had been largely destroyed by the time Kesselring arrived. The same could be said for other German divisions that suffered heavily, like the 164th Light in the center, or 327th Infantry on the north coast. To Hitler's eye, all seemed in

order. He was therefore shocked when word came, in the midst of his conference with Kesselring, that the front in the north had collapsed and a general retreat to Tunis was now underway.

“How is this possible? What is going on there?” He shouted at Kesselring. “You leave to come here and confer with me, and the entire front is now a shamble! What is von Arnim doing?”

It was soon reported that von Arnim himself was now in enemy hands, and that, more than anything, communicated the gravity of the situation now underway in Tunisia.

“This is outrageous!” said Hitler. “Outrageous! Von Arnim has surrendered? I will have every member of that man’s family rounded up and executed!”

That was a threat that the Führer never followed through on, but it conveyed the degree to which he was stunned and dismayed by what had happened. Both Hitler and Mussolini had counted on a long and grudging defense in Northern Tunisia. As long as they could keep the Allies fighting there, then they could not plan other operations aimed at either Greece, Italy or even Southern France.

The signal received from Nehring offered one brief moment of hope, and the Führer waited all night for word on this counterattack. Yet it was soon eclipsed by more reports that Weber had withdrawn all the way to Bizerte, and the British were closing in on that city as well. Everyone at OKW knew the end had come, a few days later than it had in the old history, but in no less convincing a way.

There would be continued fighting for Tunis and Bizerte for another seven days, but then, on the 20th of May, General Giovanni Messe accepted surrender terms for all Italian Army forces under his control. Walther Nehring was in Allied hands, and the German forces in Tunisia formally surrendered under the command of Major-General Gustav von Vaerst, who had taken over for Nehring, and General Weber who had organized the last defense at Bizerte.

The long and bitter struggle that had begun so long ago, with the Italian incursion into Egypt and “O’Connor’s Raid,” was now over. The shock of the defeat lay upon Hitler for weeks after, for there had been no Stalingrad, and this was the greatest setback the German Army had suffered in the war to date, with over 150,000 German Army soldiers taken prisoner. The 10th, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, the veterans of North Africa, were stricken from

the Army roster, though the Reichsmarshall immediately gave orders that his division was to be rebuilt. It was said that counting the Italian losses, Axis casualties and POW's exceeded a quarter of a million men.

The key to that victory had been the steady rise in proficiency of the Allied air forces, which had come to dominate the skies over the battlefield, and were instrumental in choking off supplies. By the end, the Allied air supremacy was so pronounced, that British and American destroyers could sail with impunity and shell enemy positions all along the northern coast, as far as Bizerte.

Admiral Raeder's fleet had been ordered to Toulon by Hitler even as the final Allied operation got underway on May first. Timing the transit of the Straits of Messina at night, the fleet endured a raid by American B-24's, which sunk a destroyer and two Italian Cruisers, and put light damage on the forward deck of *Fredric de Gross*, also straddling the *Bismarck* with two bombs that spent themselves on the ship's heavy side armor. But the two precious carriers got through unscathed, and their fighters, led by Marco Ritter, cost the Americans 14 bombers and six defending night fighters.

Raeder reached Naples on May 3rd, lingering there for no more than a day before transiting the Tyrrhenian Sea, past Rome and over the northern tip of Corsica where German air power was thick enough to protect the fleet. So Hitler still had one Ace to play when the time came, and would be glad he had not ordered the fleet to make a last gasp attack that would have led to certain disaster. In his mind, he would at least have some floating steel as a defense against any subsequent Allied invasion, and so Raeder's final hour would not yet come.

When 62 B-24's struck the very next day and put damage on the Prinz Heinrich, Hitler ordered the fleet to move to Genoa. A large commercial port, it had not been used as a naval base by the Italians, with La Spezia further south, but it would serve the Germans very well. The Reichsmarshall was pressed upon to send a flak brigade there to beef up the AA defenses, and Raeder's fleet settled in, as far from Allied Bombers as it could get in the Med.

The Grand Admiral was decorated for his campaign in the Black Sea, and then told to begin a general survey of the Italian Navy to see if any of their ships could be incorporated into a combined fleet. He was to make plans aimed at repelling future Allied amphibious operations, with Sicily uppermost in the Fuhrer's mind as the most logical point to be attacked next.

That had been the initial thinking of the Allied leaders at their Casablanca conference, but the final plans had not yet been decided, and there was a strong contingent within the British War Planning Division that was favoring another objective, one that a certain Lord Nelson had fingered long ago as being worth 50 Malas. In our story, another Admiral would take that same torch, and carry it to the TRIDENT conference in May of 1943.

Part III

Time is Money

*“Remember that **time is money** . He that idly loses five shillings' worth of time loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea. ”*

—Benjamin Franklin, 1748

Chapter 7

Admiral Nelson had been operating from the Maddalena Islands for many reasons, and now he sought to put some of them in writing in an appeal to the First Lord of the Admiralty in a letter dated 21st June, 1804. He settled sideways in his chair, favoring the bruise on his side that had bothered him for some time. For months on end, he would ride the restless swells of the sea, and could think of only three occasions when he set foot off the decks of HMS *Victory* in that time. To say that he was relentless, and endlessly patient at the same time in his watch on the French at Toulon, would be an understatement.

Lord Nelson had just related the disposition of his fleet, which was largely gathered off Toulon, daring the French to sally forth and engage. He had most of his ships of the line, with triple rows of cannon on either side, a formidable presence at sea, and sheer destruction when he set them loose to war upon the enemies of the Crown.

Tonight, he was writing to the Right Honorable Lord Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, to see if he might impress upon him the importance of a certain island—Sardinia.

“Either France or England must have it,” he wrote, “and the loss to us would be great indeed. From Sardinia we get water and fresh provisions; the loss would cut us off from Naples except by a circuitous route, for all the purposes of getting refreshments, even were Naples able to supply us.”

Nelson had spent countless hours drafting his long-winded orders to this ship or that, directing them to seek out wood for the fires, and fresh water and provisions, always along the accommodating coast of Sardinia. He considered its position as absolutely essential to the logistical support of the Royal Navy in the Med, and so he presently had all of 15 heavy ships, the backbone of his fleet, covering that island by standing off Toulon, for he deemed the threat of an easy French occupation of Sardinia to be most dire.

Nelson knew that the French had a large garrison of over 7,000 men at Toulon, and all they wanted was one day when his watch might falter. In that single day, they could be quickly ferried to Sardinia, and Napoleon would have the place. Yet to be here, off Toulon, also meant that he could not have

his ships at La Maddalena, which was his preferred roosting place. So on this night, he was petitioning Lord Melville for more ships, carefully prefacing this letter with a dispatch listing the dispositions of his entire fleet.

He had 15 ships off Toulon, two on either side of the straits of Gibraltar, six at Malta, five in the Adriatic protecting the trade ship routes, four more at Naples courting the favor of the Monarch there. That left him with only a handful of ships elsewhere, carrying messages and dispatches, under repair, provisioning, or limping back to Gibraltar after storm damage. Then he made his pitch....

“I can barely keep a sufficient force at sea to attend to the French Fleet. I have no ships to send to Maddalena, but not less, my Lord, than ten Frigates, and as many good Sloops, would enable me to do what I wish, and what, of course, I think is absolutely necessary.... If I were at your Lordship’s elbow, I think I could say so much upon the subject of Sardinia, that attempts would be made to obtain it; for this I hold clear, that the King of Sardinia cannot keep it, and if he could, that it is of no use to him; that if France gets it, she commands the Mediterranean; and that by us it would be kept at a much smaller expense than Malta. From its position alone, it is worth *fifty* Maltas.”

One had only to look at the map to see what Nelson knew implicitly. Sardinia sat between the Tyrrhenian Sea to the east, and the Central Med. It had good ports and anchorages at Cagliari in the south, where a squadron of frigates could vex and harry ships approaching the Sicilian Narrows, or attempting to enter the Tyrrhenian Sea. There was a bay that served as a good anchorage at Oristano on the west coast of the island, and Porto Torres was north near Sassari. From there ships could get out into the Central Med easily, and patrol the waters between Sardinia and Mallorca.

Lord Nelson’s favorite haunt was in the northeast, which would later become the Italian naval base at La Maddalena. It was an excellent anchorage and commanded the Bonifacio Strait, which Nelson could close any time he choose. This would force the enemy over the tip of Corsica if they wished to enter the Tyrrhenian Sea, and went a long way towards denying the French access to the Eastern Med. From that anchorage, Nelson’s fleet could also send out patrols to survey the coast of Italy, including the ports at Livorno, La Spezia, and Genoa, and the French ports of Nice, Toulon and Marseille.

Malta could do none of that. In fact, it could do nothing at all, for as the Allies now contemplated where to go after Tunisia decades later, in 1943, it was still in enemy hands.

* * *

“**Malta** ,” said Montgomery. “It sits like a steel barb south of Sicily, right astride the sea lanes from Benghazi and Tripoli, which means our plan to invade Sicily simply cannot proceed unless we first reduce and occupy that bastion. It is as important now to the Germans and Italians as it once was to us, and we simply must have it.”

He was addressing a large and distinguished audience, which included Generals Marshall, Eisenhower, Patton, Brooke, O’Connor, Alexander and Wilson; Admirals King, Tovey and Mountbatten, and Generals Arnold and Tedder for the respective Air Forces. Dubbed the TRIDENT conference, which had originally been scheduled to take place in Washington D.C., it was now happening in London, and on the 25th of May 1943, even while the last embers of the fighting in Tunisia were cooling. The group would meet to review the many plans put forward for future operations, and then reach a consensus that would go to Churchill and Roosevelt for final approval. Montgomery was called to give his front row seat military appraisal of how the Allies should now proceed, and Patton would do the same.

“Yet consider the time involved in planning such an attack,” said Eisenhower.

“It’s been in the works for some time,” Montgomery countered. “The Germans took the place with a lightning quick airborne drop.”

“Yes, but that option is simply not on the table for us any longer.” Eisenhower had conferred with the Air War Planning Division over the prospects of an Allied airborne operation over Malta, and the report he had received was discouraging. When the Germans took the place, they had liberal air cover flying from bases on Sicily, under 100 miles away. Malta was now 250 air miles from fields around Tunis and Bizerte, and 220 miles from Tripoli.

Malta already had a strong Luftwaffe presence, which had been too far off to do much in the battle for Tunisia, except cover the eastern outlet of the Sicilian Narrows, but was a real threat to any airborne operations, particularly when backed up by fighters from Sicily.

“Malta will have to be taken by sea,” said Eisenhower, “just like the Operation *Corkscrew* plan for the seizure of Pantelleria. We’ll have to clear them both before we contemplate any serious invasion of Sicily—unless we

scrap your plan altogether and revert back to the Operation General Patton proposed against Palermo. Frankly, I have my doubts about that one as well. In the meantime, some of the planners, including your own British team, are still advocating Sardinia as an alternative. In fact, you folks drew up plans for the invasion of Sardinia in 1941—Operations *Yorker* and *Garroter* .”

“Circumstances were entirely different back then,” said Montgomery. “In my opinion, Malta might be reduced by a combined naval and air bombardment, followed by a quick landing staged from Tunis and Tripoli. In effect, we use our naval/air power to clear the way for the sea based invasion General Eisenhower now suggests. As for Pantelleria, we can neutralize that this very month, and at least have commandos there by June 1st. The operation against Malta could then be launched as early as June 15th.”

“Perhaps Admiral Tovey could speak to the possibility of reducing Malta by sea power.”

Tovey spoke in response: “It would mean that our heavy ships would have to run the Sicilian Narrows, and under threat of air attack from Sicily the whole while. We’ve achieved dominance in the air over Tunisia, but that may soon be contested. The Germans are already strengthening the Luftwaffe in southern Italy and Sicily, and Sardinia as well. A further consideration is that Admiral Raeder’s fleet remains a clear and present danger. A major naval operation against Malta would invite Raeder’s fleet to sortie—not against Malta, but towards the Sicilian Narrows, effectively threatening our naval line of communication back to Algiers, Oran and Gibraltar. Unless Raeder is decisively defeated, that threat would persist in any operation aimed at Sicily, particularly the southeastern tip of that island as in General Montgomery’s plan. In that light, I might propose that Admiral Cunningham lead this attack on Malta, with my squadrons waiting northeast of Algiers to deter any such move by Raeder—in effect, forcing him to transit the Tyrrhenian Sea if he sought to intervene.”

“His fleet would have to run the Straits of Messina again,” said Admiral King.

“True, but he’s already done that once, and might attempt it again. If I might make an outlandish proposal at this point, the whole problem we are now discussing could be simply bypassed.”

“Bypassed?”

“Correct. We are debating the preliminaries for an invasion of Sicily. Might I suggest that we have another look at Sardinia? At present, the

Sicilian Narrows remain contested waters. The combination of enemy minefields, submarines, air attacks from Sicily and even a possible Naval sortie by the enemy as I have described are very real. Nor can we cross those waters off Sicily with an invasion fleet without first reducing and occupying Pantelleria and Malta. However, at present we are masters of the Balearic Sea. We have strong airfields at Barcelona, and can also make that a good naval supply port. We occupy Mallorca, and have been developing and expanding the facilities at Palma there, and we have Algiers. All these bases are beyond the effective reach of the Luftwaffe, and all three can be used to launch an invasion of Sardinia that can pass over seas I can control, and this requires no preliminary attack on an outer bastion such as Malta.”

“But what about communications with the Eastern Med?” said Alexander. “Our difficulties in Syria were largely due to the fact that it took so long to get reinforcements to us round the Cape and through Suez. Shouldn’t we open the Med—east to west—and eliminate that condition?”

“In due course,” said Tovey. “That would be done, but under conditions far more favorable to us once we have Sardinia. I speak now from a purely naval standpoint. If I’m asked to cover an invasion against either Sardinia or Sicily, I find the former to be a much easier task. I can operate in the Central Med, just as Lord Nelson did to keep the French Fleet bottled up at Toulon. There I would be beyond enemy air power, but if I must cover landings on Sicily, my fleet must come within range of enemy fields on both Sicily and Sardinia, particularly to cover landings in the southeast of the island, and this is one reason why I advocate taking Sardinia first, and making it our own unsinkable aircraft carrier.”

“Wouldn’t this invite the same response from Admiral Raeder?”

“Yes, but I would be facing him directly, and not looking over my shoulder if I have to transit the Sicilian Narrows to cover the *Husky* landing plan.”

Marshall spoke up now, for he had considered this and opted for Sicily. “To my thinking, we can cover Sicily better with our air force. It’s only 150 miles from Bizerte to Marsala or Trapani, and a little less from Tunis. The problem is the plan. We can’t invade Sicily without having to reduce Malta first. It’s only this insistence that we land south of Catania, on the southeast tip of the island, that makes Malta an imperative pre-requisite. Once we’re ashore at Trapani, we move to take Palermo, and then along the northern coast to Messina, which will force the enemy to abandon their positions in

southeast Sicily, or be completely cut off.”

“Sound thinking,” said Tovey. “Yet I might also add that Cagliari on Sardinia is only 140 miles from Bizerte. The real question in all of this is what we expect to achieve by targeting either island? If we take Sicily, then where do we go?”

“Right into the toe and foot of Italy,” said Montgomery. “We’ve already planned four such operations, under the code names *Buttress*, *Goblet*, *Musket* and *Slapstick*. If taking Sicily alone doesn’t knock Italy out of the war, then that should do the trick.”

“Alright, let’s assume that knocking Italy out is a good objective,” said Marshall, “but that doesn’t mean the place will suddenly be neutral. The Germans will occupy the whole peninsula, and have every reason to do so. They’ll save the 20 million tons of coal they now ship Italy annually, and then they would seize all the Italian rail stock, along with their Navy. Beyond that, they’ll retain all the naval and air bases, maintaining a threatening presence in the Central Med, which will force us to go in there after them if we want them out. Can you imagine trying to fight your way up that peninsula? The terrain is tailor made for the defense, and you’d be at it a year or longer. Let’s not forget that our real effort against the Germans must come across the English Channel, and as soon as possible. Every resource, every ship, every division we commit to operations against Italy, is one less we have to use for the main event—France.”

“If I may,” said Tovey. “This is where the occupation of Sardinia gets interesting again. It’s nearly 200 miles by air from Palermo to Naples, and to Rome, that distance increases to just over 260 miles. However, from airfields around La Maddalena, Rome is only 170 miles or so.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Patton. “If you want me to land on Sicily, I’ll do it, and I’ll take Palermo and Messina as well. But General Marshall has a point about fighting our way up that peninsula. That’s no place for a swashbuckling old cavalry officer like me. We’ll be bogged down there for months, if not a year. Yet if we do take Sardinia, we outflank anything they have in Southern Italy, and we can make an easy jump to the beaches north of Rome. You want to knock Mussolini out of the war fast? That’s the way to do it, right in the kneecap; not by tickling his foot.”

“There is some merit to that,” said Eisenhower. “If we do land in the south, and get stuck, then we’ll have to plan a subsequent invasion to unhinge that defense. Striking north of Rome would probably force any German

presence in the south to retreat north, and fast. We could then occupy all of southern Italy to get useful ports and airfields without having to fight for it, and both Sicily and Malta wither on the vine and die like rotten fruit.”

“What about the German garrison there, and dare I say, the Italian troops as well?”

“I would think the Germans would see the writing on the wall and try to evacuate Sicily once we landed in Sardinia. As for the Italians, they would likely stay put, but if we force Italy to the negotiating table, and get an armistice, we won’t have to fight them.”

Marshall thought about that, and then nodded his head, as if coming to some inner decision. Montgomery had devised a terribly complex operation. He wanted to clear Pantelleria in a week’s time, then invade Malta by sea, which would take another two to three weeks. Then he had insisted, somewhat conceitedly, that the landing on Sicily would be under his command, and take place on the southeast end of the island. Patton’s troops were to land on his left, essentially covering his flank as he pushed north for Messina, or moving to clear western Sicily after the enemy retreated. After that he wanted to invade the toe and heel of Italy and start the long push north.

“General Brooke?” he asked.

“Well, I was going to say we go bald-headed for Sicily. It would probably be the stronger blow, but considering Sardinia, it would at least afford us a base to bomb all of Italy and southern Europe, and it would likely be easier to undertake. However, it doesn’t open the Med, and it might not force Italy to the negotiating table. In my mind, we must continue serious planning there in any case, for if the Sicily plan is deemed impractical, we need an alternative operation this year. *Brimstone* seems to be the only other ticket we have.”

Chapter 8

“It might be easier to hit Sardinia and then go right to Rome,” said Marshall, “but would the Germans conclude we intend to bypass Sicily? What if they don’t, and then hold their troops in the south.”

“Then they’d be in for a rude awakening when we go for Rome,” said Eisenhower. “It’s clear that we can cut them off by hitting Central Italy after we take Sardinia. But we won’t get there any time soon if we have to fight our way up through Sicily and all of the south.”

That was going to be a real grind, thought Marshall, and it was not likely that that Monty would get far before he was stopped in that rugged terrain. It had taken him many months to push from Algiers to Bone! That meant the Allies would probably have to plan subsequent invasions, all aimed at flanking the German defensive lines across Italy. It would tie up shipping, landing craft, supplies, and divisions in the Med for months, and set back planning for *Roundup*, the main landing in France. God only knows how long it will take before Montgomery finally gets to Rome.

“The ports and airfields aren’t as good on Sardinia,” Admiral King put in. “They would have to be expanded. And if those airfields put our fighters in range of Southern France and Italy, then the inverse is true. Wouldn’t they be subject to enemy interdiction?”

“No more than our fields were in Tunisia,” said Eisenhower. “They couldn’t lick us there, and they won’t control the skies over Sardinia either, or Sicily, for that matter. Hap, isn’t that right?”

“Well,” said Air Force General Hap Arnold. “To hold fields secure on Sardinia, I think we’d also need to chase the enemy off Corsica.”

“I’m all for that,” said Lord Mountbatten. “Getting airfields on Sardinia and Corsica is a major advantage. It also lets me plan commando raids anywhere along the coast of Italy, for what that’s worth.”

“Well, gentlemen,” said Tovey. “We’d better reach some decision soon. If we go with General Montgomery’s plan, then the landing craft will have to be transported all the way around the cape, because we’ll be staging from Alexandria, Benghazi and Tobruk, now that we’ve got that cleaned up. If, however, we go for Sardinia, we can bring the landing craft in through the eastern Med to the ports I mentioned earlier, and much sooner.”

“I didn’t like *Brimstone* earlier,” said Marshall. “The Joint Chiefs didn’t like it either. But then again, they aren’t exactly keen on the need to knock Italy out of the war, as we see France as the main objective. As I said earlier, I favored Sicily as the first objective—a quick hop from Tunis. But this Malta business complicates that considering the plan Montgomery has devised. That issue concerning the landing craft is important. In the States we have a saying: Time is money, gentlemen. It will take both time and shipping resources to clear Malta, putting all that shipping at risk not once, but twice before we get boots on the ground in Sicily, and probably another month to clear that island. I can then see two or three more amphibious operations before we get north of Naples. In that light, I’m starting to agree with Eisenhower and others here. The road to Rome is much shorter through Sardinia.”

Montgomery folded his arms, lips pursed, giving Admiral Tovey a look. He knew that he might have to tussle with Patton here over where to land on Sicily, but he never thought that someone in his own camp would shift the whole strategic plan to another island, particularly the Navy. Marshall continued.

“Look... Both Sardinia and Corsica are very lightly defended now. If we were to move quickly, they could be had for a few Shillings, to put it in terms our British friends will easily grasp. But as for landing on the toe of Italy and fighting your way north, you’ll have to invest Pounds Sterling to do that, and a lot of time. Consider taking Sardinia. Then we’re poised to strike north of Rome, and we can move in air power on those islands to hammer Toulon, Marseille, Genoa and La Spezia. Those ports will all be within our fighter radius.”

“Yet you’ll be leaving the Germans, with strengthening air power, in our rear.” Montgomery pointed out the obvious.

“You can look at it that way if you want,” said Marshall, “but both Arnold and I think Tedder would probably say they can neutralize that. Yes, we’d be leaving Sicily on our flank, just as you do with any major offensive that penetrates the enemy line. Once we get fighters thick as fleas on Sardinia, then Sicily is cut off. Your Admiral Tovey put his finger on that rather nicely.”

Brooke gave Montgomery a sidelong glance, and decided he had better step in. He knew that his own war planners had also favored Sardinia, and he had to put them in line to give Monty free reign to devise this plan. Now it

was meeting a strong challenge from the Americans, and it was not the battle he, or Montgomery, thought they would be fighting. He decided to broaden the focus of the discussion to another consideration.

“There is one other option,” he said. “It’s one our Mister Churchill is particularly fond of, and I told him it would be given a fair hearing. Knocking out Italy is a fine political objective, but Hitler will be quick to occupy the place, as General Marshall pointed out. Then, from a military standpoint, the quick punch at Rome from Sardinia flanks what is likely to be a long campaign in the south. Yet we have other difficulties, and General’s Alexander and Wilson will speak to those. Rommel is in Damascus, and Guderian is in Baghdad, and they can only be there for one reason—Turkey. While not a declared member of the Axis, Turkey is certainly cooperating with Hitler, and German supply lines to both Rommel and Guderian rely on the rail lines through Turkey. Mister Churchill believes that if we could convince Turkey they’ve made a grave mistake, their support might shift to our side, and that would see the Germans forced out of Syria and Iraq in short order. Therefore, the Prime Minister proposes we revisit Crete, with the aim of then jumping right into Greece.”

“Yet if we tee that up first,” said Montgomery, “then Mussolini is likely to remain in the fight, and the terrain in Greece is no more inviting than that in Italy.”

“I suppose it will come down to which we see more desirable—Italy knocked out of the Axis, or Turkey welcomed into our Alliance. General Alexander? General Wilson?”

“We were hard pressed a month ago,” said Alexander, “but Rommel has stopped at Damascus, and Guderian has stopped at Al Hillah. In both cases, we’ve seen the withdrawal of vital mobile forces from those theaters. The Germans pulled out their number one unit, the Brandenburg Division, and that gave Guderian pause, and it was of great relief to Jumbo Wilson.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” said Wilson. “They had us on our back foot, though I thought we could hold out and keep them from taking Basra and Abadan until help arrived. Getting in those fresh troops from Perth and Burma helped us immensely. Then, when Guderian lost his Brandenburgers, things started looking a good deal better.”

“The same can be said for our situation in Syria,” said Alexander. “Hitler has taken the *Wiking* Division from Rommel, and in fact, we’ve learned that Rommel has even been recalled to Berlin. Intelligence does not think he’ll be

returning. Frankly, I think they've seen their highwater mark, and the initiative will be shifting our way soon. If, however, anything could be done to persuade Turkey to shut down the Bosphorus, the German position in both Iraq and Syria collapses immediately. They will have no recourse but to withdraw."

"And where will those divisions go?" said Montgomery. "To my mind, they would then use them to reinforce France and Italy. At the moment, we have them at a disadvantage. Now is the time to strike Italy and knock her out, and not after we chase Rommel and Guderian from their ill-conceived pursuits. Those campaigns have already run their course. They'll dry up all on their own."

"Will they?" said Brooke. "Hitler is very reluctant to give up territory, as we have seen. He could issue a stand fast order for both theaters, and that will mean we'll have to maintain a good many divisions in Iraq and Syria that could be put to much better uses. I should also say that that Prime Minister considered Iraq as the most serious threat to the Empire of the war. If Guderian ever should get to Basra and Abadan, even if he can't stay there, then he would certainly wreck those facilities and refineries if we push him back. The image of those oil fields burning has haunted Mister Churchill, and a good many others, for some time. He is somewhat relieved now that Guderian has halted his advance, but that could change along with Hitler's whims. He could, for example, go over to the defense in Syria, and then send two more Panzer Divisions to Guderian."

"Yes," said Marshall, "but I'm inclined to agree with General Montgomery on this point. Now is the time to get after Italy, while the enemy is still disorganized after Tunisia, and before Hitler starts transferring units to the West. We can see how removing the German threat in Syria and Iraq is important to the British Empire, but removing Italy does a good deal more for clearing a way to Germany itself. Again, I must remind you all that the United States believes the principle attack to defeat Germany must originate from England, and cross the Channel. However, we do see some merit in collaring Mussolini, and the operation proposed against Sardinia and Corsica also opens up the possibility that those islands, or territory we take in Northern Italy, can be used to stage a subsidiary landing in southern France. That's the way to Germany, not through the Balkans. You could take back Crete, or even land at Athens, but what if Old Man Turkey is not impressed? Take Rome, however, and that's the end of the line for the Italians. Then we

don't sit here talking about fighting in Italy, we start getting serious about fighting in France."

"Interesting," said Tovey. "I'm not an Army man, but since we hold Spain, doesn't that also permit the buildup of strong forces there, say at Barcelona? They might offer strong support for an invasion of Southern France, even if it were a secondary operation to the main attack across the channel. All the more reason to have Sardinia and Corsica in hand."

"*Firebrand* and *Brimstone*," said Eisenhower. "Those plans are looking fairly good to me."

They were back to the Hot Potato that Sardinia had become, and Brooke thought it best to put off any decision on this until he could confer with Churchill. He also had one other item on his agenda that he needed to cover.

"Well gentlemen," he said. "We've a good deal to chew on tonight. Hopefully, we can reach a consensus before this conference ends. We'll be mopping things up in Tunisia soon, and there's no time to waste. In that I'll have to agree with General Marshall—time is money, and a currency we can ill afford to squander. There is one thing more I was advised to share with you all, and it could weigh heavily on all these plans...."

Brooke stood now, and Montgomery yielded the podium so he could address everyone directly. "Gentlemen," he said. "This concerns something old, and something new, which both appeared over London on the night of February 1st. It looked to be nothing more than another air raid, only this time the Germans used a Zeppelin to make a high altitude bombing run over London. That might seem quaint, given the destruction they've achieved with simple bombers, but this airship delivered something quite unexpected. What I am to say now must be held at the highest level of secrecy, and no one outside this room is to hear a word of it. I trust to the integrity of every man here, and know that will be the case."

Then he told them what British intelligence had surmised about the attack on London, and what it could mean for the future course of the war. "All that considered," he finished, "this device was not of a very great explosive yield. Still, if it had struck a more populated area, casualties would have been a good deal higher. Now this whole thing presents two questions. The first is whether Germany has more of these weapons. We've seen nothing of this since February 1st, but that doesn't necessarily mean their cupboard is empty. The second question is what this means for operations of the sort we have gathered here to discuss. Can you imagine such a bomb exploding directly

over our invasion fleet, no matter which island we might choose in our deliberations?”

The silence in the room was ample testimony to the gravity of that prospect. Every man there was seeing some terrible bright flash in his mind, a force so strange and powerful that it could sweep pieces right off the chess board of battle. It was no longer a question of divisions, or naval squadrons maneuvering to overwhelm the enemy. Now they could simply be extinguished in one fell blow.

“My God,” said Patton. “Whoever dreamt this thing up must surely be in league with the devil himself. Where’s the honor in using a weapon like that? There’s no valor in this kind of war. It’s simple butchery.”

“Yes,” said Brooke, “It is, but I might also say that our own concept of strategic bombing as a means of breaking the enemy morale is quite callous. In fact, the policy calls for making the cities we target physically uninhabitable, and instilling in the population the constant fear of personal danger. The wording is quite plain in the directive laid out in September of 1941. Our strategic bombing campaign is to do two things, produce destruction, and fear of death. That’s certainly what Hitler was about when he started the Blitz, and we’re responding in kind. We started with Lubeck and Rostock in March of ’42, but those were small raids of two and three hundred planes. Now we’ve ramped it up to thousand plane raids, a continuous bomber stream to overwhelm the defenses of the target city. Operation Millennium did that over Cologne a year ago, and bomber command estimates we destroyed 60% of the town. In that light, this new weapon is no different in its aim. Last March, we put over 34,000 tons on the Ruhr. We estimate this weapon was not too much more than 1,500 tons of TNT equivalent.”

“But its use as a tactical weapon is something to consider,” said Montgomery. “A blast of that size, delivered at the right place and time, could completely unhinge an offensive.”

“Yes,” said Brooke. “Yet we have come to believe that this weapon was a prototype. We’ve no way of knowing whether they have more of these bombs ready, and we’ve teed up several countermeasures, both offensively and defensively. We’re going after their special weapons programs with much more fervor now, and we’re also going all out to get high altitude fighters. That was why they used something old to deliver this new terror to London, a high climbing Zeppelin, which was above our Spitfire ceiling when the attack

was made. What this means for us now is obvious. We thought we had a decisive edge with our own conventional strategic bombing campaign, but, with this weapon, Germany is back in the game, and they don't have to come with mass bombing raids as we do. This single Zeppelin delivered explosive tonnage that would have required us to use over 200 Lancasters. We also believe they can put this bomb on a single plane. It may even be light enough to be carried by a fighter-bomber, which means they could deliver it much more accurately if they chose to risk losing that plane. I'm also told by people in the know that the explosive yield of such a bomb can be dramatically increased. It's just a question of how much uranium is used for fuel. A weapon could be made to yield ten times what we saw over London, or more. This is rather disturbing, to say the least."

Admiral Tovey was sitting in dark silence, for deep within his mind, he saw the clear memory of that terrible mushroom cloud billowing up over the North Atlantic. That was the first he had seen of this weapon, though he could not trace his present life path back to that moment. There had also been another incident in the mid-Atlantic west of Gibraltar. He had been leading the fleet against the Germans, when *Rodney* met her fate, and a terrible explosion had gushed up from the sea, glowering over the scene for hours after that engagement. He had seen this weapon used twice, and never wished to see one again.

Patton was so very correct. There was no skill or valor in this kind of war—no strategy. The Bomb made talk of covering forces, strategic choke points, and all conventional operations of war, frivolous. The next war would simply be wanton destruction. The armed forces would exist simply to deliver their terrible weapons of destruction, and the world would burn. That Russian Captain Fedorov had told them of this. In his time, far in the future, this was the war they were facing when his ship had vanished... to appear here, where the fledgling infant demon that would one day devour his world was first given birth.

Chapter 9

It was a week before Hitler could throw off the pallor of anger and frustration that the demise of 5th Panzer Army had caused. He had lost North Africa, and knew that German forces could never fight there again. Now the Allies in the west were surely planning new offensives. Sicily would likely be the next objective, and to defend there he now had to find fresh divisions to send into Italy. Mussolini had seen all his colonial ambitions in Africa defeated, and was now a very shaky partner. Would his army continue to fight to defend their homeland? Would his navy fight?

In the event they would not stand with Germany any longer, and attempted to sign an armistice with the Allies, Hitler had ordered planning to begin for the occupation of the entire Italian peninsula, and the seizure of the Italian fleet. It would be called *Fall Achse*, or “Case Axis,” but was now a working plan under the codename “Operation Alaric.” It would be a plan to rapidly disarm the Italian Army in Italy, and gain control of that vital terrain.

The wolf was let in the front door by the Italians after Tunisia, for Hitler immediately promised Mussolini that he would send German troops to insure the defense of the Italian mainland. Herman Goring was rapidly commandeering new equipment from the factories, and collecting units from his Luftwaffe ground units to rebuild his Panzer Division. He promised the Fuhrer it would be ready to send to Sicily before the Allies could invade. Hitler then ordered that the collective forces that had been transferred to Sicily before the final demise of the 5th Panzer Army would be used to begin rebuilding one of the divisions lost, the 15th Panzer, only lack of ready equipment would see this division rebuilt as a Panzergrenadier Division.

The bulk of the personnel that had once made up 7th Panzer Division was already in France, rebuilding as it received new equipment, and Hitler gave orders that the 10th and 21st Panzers would also be rebuilt there, though only one of those, (the 21st) was rebuilt in the real history. But none of those forces would be ready, except Goring’s division and the new makeshift 15th Panzergrenadiers.

There were also a lot of men that had been rehabilitating in France from the vanquished Army, and Hitler ordered that they should be collected to rebuild the 90th Light Infantry Division that had been lost in Tunisia. New

recruits would have to flesh out those ranks. The need to suddenly reinforce the West, in both the Balkans and in Italy, was happening at a time when OKW was trying to devise its strategy for the next phase of the war against the Soviets, and it led to a conference at OKW that would be the German equivalent of the Allied TRIDENT meeting.

* * *

The successful defensive action initiated by General Manstein in April had restored the front in the south and punished the Russians by nearly destroying two full armies, the 63rd and 1st Guards. Only the Mechanized elements of the latter had the means to evade the trap that Manstein launched with Steiner's Korps, augmented by the 57th Panzer Korps, which he transferred from the Caucasus. The remaining rifle divisions assigned to 1st Guards Army perished in the counterattack put in by von Knobelsdorff's 48th Panzer Korps, which then advanced on Belgorod to relieve the German units that had been cut off there when Hitler declared it to be a Fortress.

In this action, the deep salient north of Kharkov achieved by 5th Tank Army and Katukov's 1st Tank Army was abandoned by the Soviets. Then Knobelsdorff's Korps, supported by 1st SS and the *Reichsführer* Brigades, sealed off that breach and relieved Belgorod. Unfortunately, the enemy resistance thickened north of that city, and efforts to again reach Prokhorovka and rescue Oppenlander's 305th Division were called off.

Both sides took losses, though those of the Soviets were more severe. In exchange, they gained all the ground between the Oskol River and the Upper Donets, preferring to see their operation Red Star as a minor victory for pushing the Germans off their front along both the Psel and Oskol Rivers. They had, at one point, a very large bridgehead over the Middle Donets, and clear roads to the Dnieper, coming within 15 kilometers of Kharkov as well.

After the action was concluded, the new front extended from the western Psel above Sumy, down to Tomarovka, which was still held by Model's 2nd Army. It then ran east to Belgorod, held by Korps Raus, before turning south along the line of the Upper Donets, with Kempf now commanding the 4th Army all the way to the big bend near Chuguyev. General Heinrici had become one of the casualties of the operation when Hitler went looking for scapegoats. He was relieved for withdrawing from his positions at the secret urging of OKW Chief Zeitzler. Knobelsdorff's Korps remained in the north

as the ready mobile reserve, with 6th, 9th and 11th Panzer Divisions, but Dietrich's 1st SS Division would now rejoin Steiner's Korps.

The Soviet 3rd Guards Army still retained a large bridgehead north of Chuguyev, but the Germans retook that city, and drove Kuznetsov's 1st Guard Army, the Popov Group, and Malinovsky's 2nd Shock Group to a line between Pechengi on the Donets bend, and Kupyansk on the Oskol River to the east. This front was anchored on the Donets Bend by the *Nordland* SS, deemed to be a division suitable for stubborn defense, but not one having offensive strength required to become a part of Steiner's Korps. East of the *Nordland* division, the Germans placed the infantry of Group Hollidt, and 54th Korps under Fetter-Pico, backstopping that line with the 57th Panzer Korps, containing 17th Panzer, and 29th and 3rd Panzergrenadier Divisions.

Both those last two units had been sent to Italy in the real history, but now they would have to remain on the *Ostfront*, for this area was deemed to be the most vulnerable to any new Soviet offensive. The bulk of their mobile formations had been driven back into the region between the Donets and Oskol Rivers, and there the Germans identified the mobile elements of Kuznetsov's 1st Guard Army, with the 1st Shock Army providing the infantry to complete this 1st Shock Group. Then Popov's mobile units joined Malinovsky to form the new 2nd Shock Group, which also contained 2nd Shock Army.

These were powerful forces, which still had offensive capability, and Manstein stated that the German front opposing them would need to be strongly buttressed by the retention of the 57th Panzer Korps in that sector. The Queen on the board, Steiner's Korps, would become the German Strategic Reserve, and it would be placed near the major objective the enemy had sought with Red Star, the great city of Kharkov.

A meeting was now convened with Zeitzler, Model, Kempf, Kluge, and Manstein in attendance, all meeting with Hitler to decide the German strategy for the late Spring and early Summer. The decision whether or not to launch Operation Downfall in May was also riding in the balance as that conference began. That was all part of the real overriding concern, the need to gain and retain the initiative on the field in the east for the remainder of 1943. The Soviet Operation had convinced both OKW, and Hitler himself, that the Soviets were slowly developing offensive capability of an alarming strength. They could be expected to try again wherever they had failed, and now the Generals had to decide what to do. Zeitzler made the opening remarks,

hoping to cement the idea the Generals had agreed upon.

“It is my belief, and that of General Manstein as well, that we should wait for the enemy to strike first, and then conduct counteroperations similar to the successful attacks made by Manstein in April.”

“Doesn’t this yield the initiative to the enemy?” said Hitler immediately.

“Temporarily,” said Manstein, “for we would again be employing the concept of elastic defense. The Russians wanted Kharkov, and they may try for it again, though I am now inclined to think they want to reach and cross the Middle Donets as their primary objective this summer. Good for them I say! In fact, I would fold back our lines if they attack with their strongest shock groups, and invite them to cross the river again, and fall right into the same trap that we used to defeat them a few weeks ago.”

“Fold back our lines? I do not like the sound of that at all,” said Hitler. “General Heinrici was all too fond of folding back his lines, and he is no longer in command of his old army.”

“Heinrici’s front on the Oskol River was not essential,” said Zeitzler, feeling he should at least defend the man. “We needed to hold the Upper Donets, and that we did.”

“Except the region north of Chuguyev. The enemy still has his foot in the door there,” said Hitler, “and he should be pushed back over the river with all speed. As for the line between the Donets and Oskol at Kupyansk, that front is now protecting very valuable terrain. The Donets must not be crossed again in the south. It is the last major barrier between the enemy and the coal mines of the Donets Basin, which also screen Rostov, the gateway to our Army Group in the Caucasus.”

“All the more reason why 57th Panzer Korps must remain there. It cannot return to the Caucasus, nor can it be made available to go to the west after this unfortunate business in Tunisia.”

“But we must find new forces somewhere,” said Hitler. “Turkey is watching these developments closely, and we cannot permit anything to threaten our position there. You may continue to advocate these risky maneuvers, General Manstein, folding back your lines in the face of an enemy attack, but in my mind, terrain yielded to the enemy is not always recovered easily, as we have seen. We may have stopped the enemy Spring offensive, but we are not on the eastern Psel any longer, are we? We are not on the northern Oskol River either. Sergei Kirov has already spoiled breakfast. Don’t go thinking I will now want to give him my lunch! I want no

more talk of folding back the lines, or inviting the enemy to take anything from us he does not pay for. For this reason, I reject the notion that we should wait for him to strike us first. This conference is to decide our own *offensive* operations, not to contemplate defense, elastic or otherwise.”

Zeitzler and Manstein had both spoken before the meeting, and this was what they expected to hear from Hitler. They had decided that it would be fruitless to engage in a two-day struggle with the Führer over this issue, and so the conference then moved quickly to offensive options, with all eyes on the map.

“Very well,” said Zeitzler. “Then we must now decide whether *Untergang* should be launched against Leningrad, and if so, when that would be most prudent. General Manstein?”

“It is clear that we cannot conduct that offensive while also contemplating offensives here in the south. If *Untergang* is launched, that is where Steiner must go, which means we will be forced to the strategic defensive in the Kharkov Donets sector. The enemy is clearly planning his defense against any thrust towards Leningrad, and yet look at all the forces he has brought to the Donets!”

“You believe they will renew their offensive here?” Zeitzler asked the question, though he already knew the answer.

“Of course they will, which is why I proposed an elastic defense to stop them as we did in April. If *Untergang* is launched in May, do not think the enemy will sit quietly on our porch here while we drive on Leningrad. He will attack, and with everything he has along the Donets—aiming to seize all that valuable territory that you are keen to protect, my Führer. Our other option is to instead pre-empt his offensive here with an attack of our own, and see that to a successful conclusion, with the aim of destroying the enemy’s power to conduct further offensives here before we launch *Untergang*.”

“I agree with that proposal,” said Model. “Mine is a defensive army, but I would rather see us after the enemy than sit waiting for him to come for us again. What are the prospects for our own offensive?”

“Three options have been identified,” said Zeitzler. “The first is Operation *Habicht* (Hawk). It will involve an attack across the Donets north of their 3rd Shock Group bridgehead, concurrent with an attack from the vicinity of Kupyansk—a pincer operation against the large group of mobile formations that remain between the Donets and Oskol Rivers. The second option is to

widen those pincers by staging the attack from a point east of the Oskol River in the south, and at Belgorod in the north. This would attempt to pocket all the enemy forces along the upper Donets as well as those on the river gap sector, a much more enterprising offensive now coded Operation *Panther* . Opinions?”

“The second is too ambitious,” said Model immediately. “Where would those pincers meet?”

“One would drive on Valuki from the south, the other on Sary Oskol in the north.”

“Those objectives are far apart, and so both pincers will also be widely spaced. This will become nothing more than two unsupported attacks. I vote no on such a plan, and rather prefer the tighter attack that Operation *Habicht* proposes.”

“I think I must agree,” said Manstein. “For *Panther* we would have to reinforce both 48th and 57th Panzer Korps to make them strong enough for the job, and the most likely means of doing so would be to split Steiner’s Korps in two. I would prefer to keep his forces united as one mailed fist. Furthermore, the terrain east of Belgorod does not favor an attack to the east as in the *Panther* Operation. We would have to cross a series of rivers, and push through heavily wooded ground. For *Habicht* , all we have to do is force the crossing at Volchansk, then drive that pincer southeast along the main road and rail. The southern pincer can drive past Kupyansk, and then swing to the northwest. They should meet about here...” He fingered the map, “At Verliki Burluk.”

“That does not gain us much ground,” said Hitler. “Operation *Panther* gives me all the terrain back that we lost in April.”

“Only if it succeeds,” said Manstein, “and I have my doubts about that, as does General Model. Our objective with *Habicht* is not to gain terrain, but to destroy the three enemy shock groups we pocket—five or six armies. If we do that, the terrain will come to us as a bonus, and we will have destroyed their offensive potential against Army Group South for the foreseeable future. Then *Untergang* may proceed in the Summer, perhaps as early as June.”

“Is there another option?” Hitler was still not satisfied.

“Kursk,” said Zeitzler. “Operation *Zitadelle* . We could strike from the Bryansk-Orel sector on one side, and from the vicinity of Belgorod, only this time that group drives north and west, with the objective being the capture of Kursk and defeat of all the enemy forces within that bulge. General Kluge?

You command Army Group Center. What is your opinion?"

"What will I use to attack from the north? I have already sent 42 Korps and 48th Panzer Korps to the Kharkov sector. The only way to get any offensive steam would be if I received fresh panzer divisions, unless you plan on returning Knobelsdorff to my command."

"The plan calls for 48th Panzerkorps to remain in the south."

"Then I would need fresh panzers. Will the 24th Panzerkorps be refitted and returned to the front?"

"I'm afraid not," said Zeitzler. In fact, we must also withdraw its last division, 22nd Panzer. The division fought bravely in April, a real life-saver for Model's flank, but it is simply worn out."

"Then perhaps the divisions sitting in Army Group North?"

"Out of the question," said Hitler. "No further forces will be withdrawn from that Army Group."

Kluge shrugged. "Then I regret to say that I do not believe that Army Group Center, as it is presently structured, is capable of mounting and offensive from Bryansk that has the slightest chance of ever reaching Kursk. At best, I could put in a spoiling attack, and then the main effort would have to come from the south, which I assume would be a combination of Knobelsdorff and Steiner."

"That attack alone might be enough," said Zeitzler.

"Yes," said Manstein, "but it leaves that large grouping of forces unfought between the Donets and Oskol, and behind our main offensive. I don't like that, and I would suggest that *Habicht* be launched first to destroy those two Soviet Shock Groups."

"How much time do you think we have here, Herr General?" Hitler began to lecture again. Time was also money in his mind. "The *Habicht* operation would take two or three weeks, and there goes May. If we then move forces to launch Operation *Zitadelle*, another week is lost and it will be late June before we could then begin to contemplate *Untergang*, possibly even July. I think we must choose one or the other. *Habicht* is a little bite that hardly fills the stomach, and leaves us hungry for more in *Panther* or *Zitadelle*. I think we would be better just to form up for *Zitadelle* and attack. Kursk is a worthwhile objective, and attacking in great force from the south should get us there. I will see what I can do to strengthen your assault force, General Kluge. My thinking leans towards *Zitadelle*. Prepare for that as the main operation."

It was a strange echo of the decision made in the old history. Then, there had been no consideration for an Operation *Untergang* , but the strategic situation in Army Group South was very much the same as it was before, with one exception. Manstein still had forces deep in the Caucasus....

Part IV

Zitadelle

“We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave... and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—the place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.”

—Hunter Thompson

Chapter 10

“*Zitadelle* would require Steiner to move north,” said Manstein, “but a little deception would be in order here. The enemy watches Steiner’s Korps like a hawk. If that hawk looks like it is forming up for the northern pincer of *Habicht*, and 57th Panzer Korps gets positioned in the south near Kupyansk, perhaps that would convince them we are going to attempt that pincer operation. Knobelsdorff can move in tight behind Model and appear to take up a defensive posture, and if *Zitadelle* is the final decision, then Steiner finds his Korps in a very good place to quickly move north.”

And so it was decided, the history leading down the same familiar pathways as it did in another telling of these events, but it left Manstein with more than a few misgivings. First off, the enemy strength between the Donets and Oskol Rivers was considerable. What if that force were used to stage a strong counterattack while the *Zitadelle* operation was pushing north? He voiced this objection again, but Hitler batted it aside.

“Once they see what we are reaching for, the enemy assault groups in the south will have no choice but to retreat north if they wish to intervene, and so we solve two problems in one throw.”

“You assume their counterattack would be aimed directly at the base of our offensive towards Kursk,” said Manstein. “If they do what you suggest, all the terrain east of Belgorod that I mentioned earlier will be a strong shield against such a counterattack, and for this reason I do not think they would do this. A more indirect approach would serve them better. They could just attack towards the Middle Donets again, or even Kharkov.”

“Nonsense. They will retreat, I am certain of this.”

“Then they remain unfought,” said Manstein, “a sword the enemy still has to use against us.... Somewhere.”

“We know where they will be going,” said Hitler. “Why must everything be so complicated? They will try to stop *Zitadelle*, and then Steiner will deal with them when they do.”

“Against five more armies? And you expect he will still have the strength to take Kursk?”

“They will not be able to withdraw *all* their forces. Half will have to stay behind to hold that front. Do not worry yourself with this unnecessary

speculation. You had no difficulty compelling the enemy to retreat from Kharkov, when they were within a hair's breadth of taking it. This will play out much the same way."

Manstein was still uncomfortable, but no one else came to his support. Kluge will not get anywhere from his side of that bulge, he thought. Steiner and Knobelsdorff, when side by side, will have tremendous power, but can they do this alone?

Hitler could see the displeasure on Manstein's face, and so he decided to throw his Field Marshal a bone.

"You may prepare for *Habicht* to launch on four days' notice," said Hitler. "We will also prepare for *Zitadelle*, with Steiner instead moving north as we have discussed. Will that satisfy you, General Manstein? Target June 1st for the start date of both operations. I will give you my final decision four days before that start date. Now... We must discuss other matters, and how to reinforce the West. The loss of 5th Panzerarmee was a very hard blow—150,000 German troops!"

No one said anything, fearing Hitler would bemoan that for the next hour and begin a long litany of what went wrong there. Instead, he stayed on topic—how to reinforce the West.

"I have had to recall divisions committed to operations in the early spring, in spite of the fact that they might continue to bear good fruit. Guderian worked wonders in Syria and Iraq, and your own Operation Edelweiss was masterful, General Manstein. Yes, we have a new enemy now, but Volkov was a do nothing Ally all along, worse than the Italians! That said, we must consider how to keep Mussolini in the fold, and what to do should he falter. I need troops for that, so I have recalled the Brandenburg Division from Guderian, and all of Student's troops. This means that Guderian will not go to Basra as I hoped."

"And the fact that I needed to withdraw 57th Panzerkorps and all of Hollidt's Infantry also means that I will not be going to either Astrakhan or Baku." Manstein wanted that point understood early on.

"I realize that now," said Hitler. The shock of losing 5th Panzerarmee had sobered him. "Maykop and Groznyy will suffice, along with Baba Gurgur. We will concentrate our efforts now on getting as much oil as possible from those fields, but this means that our position in the Caucasus is essential, which makes the lower Don Region, and the line of the Donets, areas which we must hold at all cost. For Baba Gurgur, Turkey is essential. All our

communications to Iraq and Syria go through that country. The British are probably already scheming on how they can woo Turkey to their side of this war, and that is also a contingency that we must address. What if they succeed? What if Mussolini loses his nerve and attempts an armistice? We have Operation *Alaric* to flesh out for Italy, but what about Turkey?"

"You are suggesting we devise a similar plan to disarm the Turkish Army and occupy that country? Turkey has an army of 45 divisions! They are scattered all over the country, and the terrain is murderous."

"Yes, but it would not be necessary to occupy and control the entire country. Taking Istanbul; perhaps Ankara, and then positioning strong troops along the rail line to Baghdad would be sufficient. What would that take?"

Zeitzler thought for a time. "No less than two full corps, mostly infantry, but with enough mechanization to have some clout if needed, perhaps one or two Panzer brigades. There are presently four Turkish divisions along the Syrian border, and those would have to be confronted and disarmed. The same for eight to ten divisions around Istanbul and the Dardanelles Fortified Area."

"Ridiculous," said Manstein. "Then we will get a guerilla war all along that border, and the rail line as well. It would take very little to disrupt traffic on that rail line, and if we do this, do not count on getting long lines of volatile oil cars through Turkey. That will all have to go by sea, which means we must rebuild the pipeline from Maykop to Novorossiysk, and from Grozny to Rostov. That will take months. As for Baba Gurgur, all the pipelines from those fields flow to Tripoli and Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. In my mind, that field is useless to us. We certainly cannot use the existing pipelines, and we would have to build a new line north from Kirkuk to Mosul and then ship the oil through Turkey to Istanbul, a rail journey of a thousand miles, which could be interdicted by a single determined squad with a few demolitions. Don't forget Lawrence of Arabia! He gave the Ottoman Turks fits by tearing up their rail lines through Syria in the First War. Frankly, this problem might have been avoided if we had chosen to negotiate with Ivan Volkov instead of making him an enemy. Now we are talking about making another enemy of Turkey. The end of this will be disaster. Where do we even get two infantry corps for such consideration? I cannot spare a single division."

Hitler considered all this, his eyes shifting over the map, as if the answer was there, some solution that would finally allow him to reap the harvest of

all his campaigns—operations *Phoenix*, *Eisenfall* , and *Edelweiss* . What were the merits of keeping so many divisions in Iraq and Syria? Rommel's old command was still a threat to Palestine and Egypt, even if the loss of the *Wiking* Division meant those forces had lost a good deal of their offensive power.

“We can go over to the defense in Syria,” he said. “General Kübler can stand on defense there now, which will free up 2nd and 16th Panzer Divisions. I will leave the 101st Panzer Brigade with Kübler, and send those panzers to Ankara and Istanbul—or Italy.”

“Send them to Italy, if you must,” said Manstein. “But I beg you, do not make an enemy of Turkey, by any means. As for Volkov—Make peace! Offer him the return of all his provinces in the Caucasus in exchange for an agreement that the Todt Organizations can rebuild that pipeline to Rostov. Then I can pull Hansen's Army out of there, and use it to make certain the Russians never get to Rostov, because if they do, then the whole affair would be lost.”

“Make peace with that conniving slackard, Volkov?” Hitler seemed aghast.

“Why not? And do so before he thaws things out with Sergei Kirov. When that happens, and it will, then the Soviets can pull another three or four Armies off their Volga Front, and I do not have to tell you where they will go. They will come to the lower Don and Donets Basin.”

“Do you honestly think Volkov would agree to peace with Germany now?”

“You have showed him what the consequences of war are,” said Manstein. “Unless he makes peace with Sergei Kirov, he will sit on his oil fields at Astrakhan and Baku, and do little more. At least if he returns to the Axis, we can make some use of him. And you must do nothing to convince Turkey they may be in danger from us. The minute they see troop movements into Bulgaria, they will get very nervous, and do what you fear—they will join the Allies. I have already shown you how useless Baba Gurgur is to us. Kübler will not go to Suez, and Guderian will not go to Basra. That is the fact of the matter. So why keep ten divisions tied up in Iraq and Syria?”

“To keep ten British Commonwealth Divisions there,” said Hitler. “If we go, then they have all those troops available to put against us somewhere else.”

“Not so. They had other fish to fry. Many of the divisions now in

southern Iraq will return to Burma, or be used to carry out plans they must surely have to retake Ceylon from the Japanese. So do not worry about those forces. As for what they have in Palestine, they took most of the armor from O'Connor's 8th Army, and one good infantry division, and we have worn them down in the fighting in Syria. Most of the infantry will probably just stay in Palestine as a garrison, as it was before. I know how inimical the loss of hard won terrain is to you, but I state now that neither Iraq nor Syria will be in any way useful to our war effort. On the contrary, the ten or twelve divisions there will be very useful—elsewhere.”

Hitler frowned, his eyes on the map. Manstein was telling him that all his aspirations in these spring operations were folly. “Do you think I have sent my Generals and troops into these places for mere sport? Now you suggest I simply give Iraq and Syria back to the British—I will not! What we have taken, we will hold. The pipelines will be built! The oil must come to the Reich, and all those troops must stay where they are to make certain that happens. There will be no peace with Ivan Volkov either. In fact, if I must postpone Operation *Untergang* , and then send all those troops to Astrakhan and Baku to destroy his little empire, so be it!” He pounded the map over Astrakhan, and silence fell heavily on the room.

“As for Sergei Kirov, wait until he sees Operation *Zitadelle* unhinge all his plans for another offensive. I have made my decision. Launch that operation as soon as possible! Make some good use of yourself, General Manstein. These notions of handing the enemy Iraq and Syria will addle your mind. Go and take Kursk!”

That final decision was the deep reverberating echo of the real history—Operation *Zitadelle* . Yet it would be a much different battle. Kluge would be much weaker with his thrust from the north, yet the Soviets would not be as well prepared, still contemplating offensive action of their own.

* * *

“What might they do next?” Asked Sergei Kirov. “Surely they have plans for an offensive.”

“Frankly,” said Zhukov, “I was surprised they stopped where they did in April. I expected them to continue to try and push us off the upper Donets.”

“Perhaps they did not have the strength. Steiner had only three divisions this time in their main attack.”

“But they could have reorganized and continued, particularly after they relieved Belgorod.”

“Yet they did not do so,” said Kirov. The question is, what will they do now?”

“Their aim will be to try and upstage any further offensive plans we have for the early summer, and dissipate our offensive strength. They could confront us directly again in the south, or move their assault divisions elsewhere—perhaps to the Orel sector.”

“Yet we have seen no sign of that kind of movement,” said Intelligence Chief Berzin. “In fact, the latest reports show Steiner consolidating at Kharkov, and we have learned there are orders for him to move to the Donets near Volchansk.”

“Volchansk? Then they mean to force a crossing there?”

“Possibly. Their three mobile divisions in the south have moved towards Kupyansk, but I doubt if they would try to take that city unsupported. This is why we think they are planning an imminent operation.”

“A pincer operation against our 1st and 2nd Shock Groups,” said Zhukov, pointing out their positions on the map. “This would be the safe choice for them now. It confronts our main strength in the south, threatens an encirclement operation, and serves to expend our use of that force in any offensive role.”

“Then we must beat them to the punch,” said Kirov. “Can’t you use those two shock groups to attack now?”

“Where? Towards the Middle Donets again? We would have the same battle that we just lost. Steiner would simply cross the Donets at Chuguyev and cut us off. In fact, I believe this is exactly what their General Manstein would like us to do—attack towards the Middle Donets. He would fold back his line and graciously let us go there. And then he would cut us off again. No, I think we should wait and receive whatever offensive they have planned. Then devise an appropriate counterattack.”

“This pincer operation—is that what they will do?” Kirov looked at Berzin.

“We have picked up a lot of traffic, logistical orders and such. Something is brewing. The code word is *Habicht* —Hawk. Yet we have also gotten wind of another operational code: *Zitadelle* —Citadel.” Both Berzin and Kirov knew of these operations from the Material they still held secret, and now they would seek to plant certain information in the mind of Zhukov to

prepare him for things they saw looming on the near horizon. Neither man could be certain that the Germans would do what they did in the Material, but if they did choose such a plan, Kirov wanted Zhukov to have a way to answer it.

Chapter 11

“Where is this Citadel operation?” asked Zhukov.

“A plan to strike at Kursk. There has been some unusual activity in Model’s 2nd Army zone. Stores and munitions are being moved closer to his front lines, and the rail lines feeding that area are all being repaired.”

“Any sign of a buildup?”

“Not yet. A Panzer Division, number twelve, was sent to their Army Group Center last week, but their 48th Korps remains in defensive positions behind Model.”

“Watch Steiner,” said Kirov. “Those divisions will always be at the heart of any major offensive they plan. General Zhukov, we believe there may be more than meets the eye here. What is your plan for defense in the north?”

“5th Shock Group is still there, and fairly strong. Katukov is there as well with his 1st Tank Army, but I was considering moving him to join Kuznetsov and rebuild his Shock Group in the south to an all mechanized force. The rifle divisions he had were badly mauled in the enemy counterattack, and most have now been disbanded.”

“I see... Perhaps you had best wait on that order to Katukov, at least until we let Berzin chew on this business concerning the German Citadel plan. Leave 1st Tank Army in general reserve in the north.”

“As you wish.”

“What would your response be to the other German plan—Hawk.”

“If it is a pincer operation aimed at 1st and 2nd Shock Groups, they will bite off more than they can swallow. Those forces remain very strong. We lost Ermakov’s Motor Rifle Division, and learned a good lesson when battling their armor. We still have good tank strength there, but more of the newer models are needed, and quickly.”

“We have additional Kirov-1 shipments heading your way,” said Berzin. “Some will go to Katukov, the rest to Kuznetsov.”

“That will help. To answer your earlier question, Mister General Secretary, it is my opinion that our southern group has the strength to repel any attempt to conduct an envelopment operation. I have also moved up the 47th Army from Steppe Front to stand as a general reserve and replace 63rd Army, which will need to be rebuilt. The new army is moving by rail to

Kupyansk.”

“Very well, I will take your word that the south is secure. If they should instead strike us in the north, then what?”

“As Katukov is being retained there, I am confident we can hold long enough to evaluate that situation and make an appropriate response. Should the south remain stable, I would consider transferring a Shock Group to reinforce the north if necessary. However, our best option might be to simply counterattack in the south.”

“Explain,” said Kirov, thinking.

“If they strike us in the north,” said Zhukov, “then they want Kursk back. To have any chance of getting there, they will need Steiner’s troops on the line. So while they are trying to take Kursk, I will be free to attack again in the south. I could threaten Kharkov, or drive on the Middle Donets in this case. Once they look over their shoulder, I believe that would put an end to any operation against Kursk. Then we go over to general counterattack.”

“Very well, General. You have not failed us in the past. We will do what we can to redress the shortfall in heavier tanks, and please keep me informed of the general situation on the field.”

Zhukov had handed the General Secretary the old Napoleonic maxim that the best defense was a good offense. He saw his armored Shock Groups as capable of repelling any German attack, and launching another offensive if the situation warranted that. It was the very same assessment that Manstein had surmised, yet the German General could not overcome the real obstacle to German strategic planning—Adolf Hitler.

The battle fought in late April was the first real field test of the new Soviet heavy mobile forces against the best the Germans had to oppose them. The enemy had prevailed, and now Zhukov was inwardly hoping the factories could get him more tanks capable of standing with the alarmingly potent new German models in Hitler’s shock divisions.

The battle that was coming would be another test of steel versus steel. The Germans were well ahead in terms of heavy tank production. In the real history, over 80% of the tanks fielded by the Germans at Kursk were Pz-III and IV models. There were only 200 of the new Panther Pz V, 147 Tigers and 90 Ferdinands. In this history, the Panzer II had been largely phased out and replaced by the German Leopards with a 50mm main gun. Almost all the Pz IIIs were gone, sent off to HQ companies, and rear area depot garrisons, or delivered to the Hungarians, Rumanians and Italians. Only 75 Pz-IIIN tanks

were on the field in late May of 1943 in the south, with 30 more Flampanzer models. There were still 402 Pz IV's, mostly F1 and F2 models, but the new Lion-75 was vying to become the standard medium tank, and there were 342 of those on the field.

The real difference was in the heavy tank category, the legacy of Brigadier Kinlan and his Challenger II's. The shock had been so severe, that it had spurred the German effort to increase both armor and hitting power for its panzer force. As a result, there were now about 250 Lion-88 models in the south, with 46 more Tiger I's and 243 Panthers. They also had 80 Ferdinand 'Elephants' arriving by rail that very week.

This monster was built on unused chassis designed by Porsche when they were competing for the contract to build the Tiger tank. Henschel got the contract for the Tiger, so Porsche had about 100 unused chassis and designed a new tank destroyer mounting Krupp's newly developed 88 mm *Panzerjägerkanone* 43. It was meant to replace the lightly armored Nashorn, and when it came to armor, this 65-ton beast was given a full 200mm, a full 80mm thicker than the Tiger.

All in all, the heavy metal the Germans were wielding was much stronger than in the real history. The plan was to line up six panzer divisions abreast, the 9th, 6th and 11th on the left, backed by Grossdeutschland Division, and Steiner's three SS divisions on the right. The ground they would attack into was not traversed by networks of trenches and minefields, nor was there a strong anti-tank line established yet. The thick layers of concentric defensive lines that had proved so impenetrable in the real battle did not exist here. That said, the forces deployed near the point of attack were still very strong.

Rokossovsky, the overall Voronezh Front Commander, had the entire 5th Shock Group, (5th Tank Army, 5th Shock Army, 5th Guards Army), and they were right on the line between Tomarovka and Belgorod, with the mechanized forces poised to make swift counterblows. Behind them, at Oboyan, was Mikhail Katukov's 1st Tank Army, and more strong infantry forces were available in theater if needed, another full army.

Though the concentration of German forces was impressive, and would be intimidating under any circumstances, Manstein nonetheless had strong reservations about this attack. Hitler had rejected his preferred operation, *Habicht*, and that was going to leave not one, but two strong enemy shock Groups in the south unfought.

We are making a serious mistake here, he thought. We should have dealt

with the threat in the south first, but the Führer sees no gain of territory in such a battle. He does not yet realize that this whole affair is not about occupying the Soviet Union, but defeating its army! Now he wants Steiner to lead the charge all the way to Kursk.

This attack should not be made....

* * *

It was 9th Panzer in Knobelsdorff's 48th Panzerkorps that opened the attack to the left of Tomarovka, and it rippled west through the lines of 6th Panzer, and then Balck's 11th. They would be attacking Gorodov's 21st Army, a large formation of nine rifle divisions, four of those being Guards, and three tank brigades in support. But these stronger divisions had been positioned well to the west, near Proletarsky, where they had been planning to make an attack against the German infantry front. That meant that Knobelsdorff's attack would fall mainly on the line of Rifle Divisions in the Army, the 243rd, near Tomarovka, and the 279th, 259th, 78th and 195th extending along the line to the west.

The 279th Division was all but smashed in the shock of the initial attack made by 9th Panzer Division. As the line buckled when the 6th and 11th Panzers joined the attack, Gorodov was sluggish in his response, but he managed to get one tank brigade, the 59th, moving to the point where Balck's 11th Panzers were driving north through the lines of the 78th Rifle Division. It had 16 T-34's and nine T-60's with a few SU-57's, but had the misfortune of running right into 2/501 Schwere Company, which had a dozen Tigers. The Germans engaged from long range, and cut the Soviet brigade to pieces before it could close to attack at ranges that could hurt the Tigers.

Of the three tank Corps that were placed behind 5th Shock Army on the right, only one moved in the pre-dawn darkness, Burkov's 29th. Gorodov had called Rybalko to ask for help, and so that Corps moved west across the Vorskla River, which flowed down from the north into Tomarovka. Reaching the far bank, it began to deploy for a counterattack against the breakthrough zone for 9th Panzer. General Burkov was moving into a firestorm, for the *Grossdeutschland* Division was already advancing through the breach forced in the line, even as 9th Panzer began to engage the recon elements of 29th Tank Corps.

That sudden clash forced the Russians to stop and reorganize a stronger

formation, waiting for their motorized infantry to come up in support of the armor, but in that interval, the bulk of the *Grossdeutschland* Division swept around the flank of the 29th Corps, driving for Cherkasskoye north of Tomarovka. There they would find front level artillery deploying to begin fire missions, and put those guns to rout.

The situation was rapidly moving from bad, to worse, to disaster for the eastern segment of 21st Army's line. 279th Division was destroyed, the 259th surrounded and badly disrupted, as was the 78th. The Germans had smashed a hole in the line that was 12 kilometers wide.

Gorodov now began to order his better Guards divisions to move east, but for that he needed the cooperation of 6th Army Commander Kharitonov, asking him to extend his lines eastward so the 8th Guard Para could be pulled out to move to the breakthrough zone. The 80th Guards Rifle Division had been in reserve, and it now moved to the left flank and began organizing a defensive shoulder position. The Germans immediately began to put heavy artillery on that sector, and elements of 11th Panzer and the 72nd Infantry Division continued to keep up the pressure. Meanwhile, Hauser's recon battalion moved quickly to exploit that gap, moving to try and cut the main road between Tomarovka and points west.

Balck would swing 11th Panzer to force open the left shoulder of the penetration, while Scheller's 9th Panzer attacked the 29th Tank Corps on the right shoulder. 6th Panzer continued to mop up the divisions that had been surrounded, and this allowed *Grossdeutschland* Division to drive right through the center, bearing right towards Steiner's attack closer to Belgorod.

Steiner's three SS divisions ground against the much stronger lines of the 5th Guards Army, strengthened by five regiments of engineers, and it was a difficult battle. 3rd SS made some initial progress against 5th Shock Army on the left near Tomarovka, but the Soviets counterattacked with Mechanized Cavalry brigades, pushing back the probing German recon companies and preventing any serious breakthrough on that front.

Further east it would take the combined strength of 1st and 2nd SS to break the line of 5th Guards Army. The fighting was intense all morning, but the Germans had a massive steel battering ram that they brought into action in the afternoon, two very strong battalions of new Panther tanks in KG Denker, and the Ferdinand battalion, all combined to smash the 66th Guards Rifle Division, and 13th Guards to the west was now completely surrounded and under heavy attack by both SS divisions. It was sheer muscle and steel,

an overwhelming force that beat down the valor of the Soviet Guardsmen, no matter how dogged their defense.

To make matters worse, Steiner ordered Eicke to pull out of his attack against 5th Shock Army, moving up the infantry of 42nd Korps to hold that front. Now 3rd SS would swing east into the breach being forced by Dietrich and Hausser's divisions, and the Germans had the makings of a massive pincer operation that threatened to take the whole of 5th Shock Army within its grasp.

The only thing preventing that was Rybalko's last two Tank Corps, which had remained in reserve behind 5th Shock Army. Now he had no choice other than to commit those units to try and stave off the closing of those iron jaws. 24th Corps moved west against *Grossdeutschland* , and 25th Corps had just been engaged by elements of 2nd SS. Neither Corps was anywhere near a match for the enemy divisions they were now facing.

Chapter 12

Word came to General Katukov in his headquarters north of the attack at Oboyan, and he soon gave orders to the 31st Tank Corps, telling it to prepare to move down a secondary road to Berezovka, where German recon troops had entered the town an hour earlier. This was a new Corps, with three brigades of the new T-34/85's, with 28 tanks each, so that put 84 tanks on the road south, with three battalions of motor rifle infantry in support.

As the full scope of the German attack became apparent, it was clear that some decision had to be made about 5th Shock Army. Katukov spoke with Rokossovsky via telephone, wanting to know if he needed to form his troops for a counterattack, or build a defensive position north of Berezovka.

"5th Shock is in danger of being cut off," said Rokossovsky. "It has held on to Tomarovka, but the pressure from 3rd SS Division eased up three hours ago. We now believe they are moving that division into the penetration achieved by the other two SS units. If we allow that army to be pocketed, they might have a nice big stone in their belly that will force them to envelop and reduce it."

"That's a lot to sacrifice," said Katukov. "There are three other fish in the barrel. Rybalko's entire 5th Tank Army could be pocketed, all three corps."

"Yes, but this must have the effect of slowing down this offensive. They want Kursk. There can be no other objective for an attack on this scale."

"And if they simply screen off the 5th Shock Army and continue? My army would be hard pressed to stop them if those two pincers unite. And once they close the trap, Rybalko will have perhaps another day's worth of ammunition—maybe two."

"I am taking further defensive measures," said Rokossovsky.

"Defensive? We will need to organize a counterattack to make sure we establish contact with those armies."

"All in good time," said Rokossovsky, which frustrated Katukov. Yet the front commander was aware of bigger events in the offing which he did not wish to discuss on the telephone. "Move towards Berezovka, and take it if the opportunity presents itself. That will bring your army close enough to reach the others when we counterattack. I am bringing up additional reserves."

Rokossovsky could have ordered 5th Shock to pull out under cover of

darkness, but he was opting to stand his ground. An army of that size, particularly with 5th Tank included, could not be defeated quickly. It had staying power to last as long as the General needed in this situation, and now he got on the telephone to Stary Oskol where the 8th Guards Army was waiting in reserve.

The man who answered that phone call was one Vasily Chuikov, the stone-faced defender of Volgograd. The survivors of his 62nd Army had formed the root and stem of a new formation, which was now composed of six rebuilt Guards Rifle Divisions, with two heavy tank brigades and a regiment of SU-122's. It was ordered to begin boarding the trains for movement to Prokhorovka. Zhukov was taking no chances that Steiner would finally break through and begin a rampage toward Kursk. And so the 'Man of Iron Will,' as Chuikov was now known, was moving on the steel rails after midnight, his first major movement to battle since Volgograd. He would reach Prokhorovka that night and establish his headquarters there, but the troops would continue on south along the rail line to Belgorod.

Balck kept attacking that night as well, wanting to push back the line of 21st Army and secure the left flank. Hopefully, there would be infantry coming up to relieve him soon, but in the meantime, he ordered Hauser to scout out the situation north in the event the enemy had strong reserves at hand.

General Chmienko of the 31st Tank Corps would not get to Berezovka that night. The town had already been bypassed by the 6th Panzer, its mop-up mission complete. Hunnersdorff then moved quickly north to Verkhopenye, the new vanguard of the drive towards Kursk. That same night, as Katukov had feared, the *Grossdeutschland* Division turned east to meet 3rd SS, which had now exploited the work of its brother divisions and took the lead position in that pincer. The jaws closed sometime after midnight, and when the news reached OKW that the offensive had already encircled two Soviet armies in the Tomarovka Pocket, Hitler was elated.

General Katukov could not understand why Rokossovsky reacted the way he did. This was obviously a major German offensive, as big as the Backhand Blow that had defeated 1st and 2nd Shock Groups the previous month, and drove them well north of the Donets. But he did not know about Chuikov's 8th Guards Army arriving until the Morning of the 26th, and so now he moved his 3rd Mech Corps into blocking positions north of Berezovka, glad to know that the Stone Man had something up his sleeve after all.

He wanted to get to Berezovka, but the Germans were already there, so he moved on Verkhopenye, where reports of fighting were soon on the radio. He could hear the distinctive sound of 88s firing in the dark, and being answered by the 85mm guns of his own tanks. His enemy had moved much faster than anticipated, and he quickly got on the radio to inform Rokossovsky.

“I could not get to Berezovka as ordered,” he said, “The Germans are already north of there, as far as Novenkoye, and we are fighting in Verkhopenye. I’m going to try and push them out.”

“Do so,” said Rokossovsky. “Bring your entire 1st Tank Army there. Here is your chance to march to the sound of the guns. You must keep them there. Keep fighting. If they pull out, I want to know which direction they go, immediately.”

“Very well,” said Katukov, his blood up with the new day, and ready for a brawl. As he moved south, 3rd Mech Corps was used to screen the western approaches to Berezovka, while 31st Tank Corps attacked Verkhopenye. The east was being covered by 8th Guards Army, and as their first divisions reached the main road to Oboyan between Pokrovka and Verkhopenye, they met the Grossdeutschland Division. Behind that front, both 5th Shock and 5th Tank Armies were now in a pocket, a great circle on the situation map, with a diameter of about 16 kilometers.

Yet the decision made by Rokossovsky did have a strong effect on the offensive as a whole. Instead of seven panzer divisions advancing north, Balck’s 11th was now widely deployed on the left flank against 21st Army and elements of Katukov’s 3rd Mech. On the left, most of Dietrich’s 1st SS was holding against 5th Guards Army. In the center, the bulk of Hausser’s 2nd SS and Scheller’s 9th Panzer were just north of the pocket. This left only three divisions now in the advance, 6th Panzer, *Totenkopf*, *Grossdeutschland*. That was only 40% of the initial offensive power that began the operation, and meeting two new strong Soviet armies brought the advance to a standstill.

All of 42nd Infantry Korps was wrapped around those two trapped Soviet armies, but it wasn’t quite enough, unless the enemy position could be compressed. The defense being weakest in the north led to the decision to use 9th Panzer and *Das Reich* to attack there instead of moving north. The plan was to drastically compress that pocket, which would allow it to be invested by the infantry, then freeing up the panzers to continue north.

The 2nd SS was tightly concentrated, and it fell like a hammer on the

northern edge of that pocket, with the second blow delivered by 9th Panzer. The perimeter began to buckle like a dented shield, collapsing inward towards the center of the pocket. They would continue the attack until well after sunset, and into the early morning hours of May 27th.

Rokossovsky's decision to expose 5th Shock and 5th Tank to the possibility of rapid destruction was a gamble that had at least done what he anticipated. If those troops had pulled out, then the infantry of the German 42nd Korps would be holding on the shoulders instead of Balck and Dietrich. And the Germans would still have all seven Panzer divisions available to continue to prosecute their attack. He did so because he knew one thing that Katukov did not know, Vatutin was preparing another massive counterblow in the south with 1st and 2nd Shock Groups—exactly what Manstein had predicted and feared.

That night another cable was sent to General Nikolai Vatutin, the dour faced commander of the newly established "Donets Front." It read simply—ENEMY FORCES WELL ENGAGED – ADVANCE HALTED AND OUR LINES STABLE.

That sent a one word message to General Yeremenko of the 1st Shock Army, which rippled down the line between the Donets and Oskol Rivers—RUMYANTSEV. It was the code name for the Soviet counterattack aimed at unhinging the German Kursk offensive. In application, this started rifle regiments probing forward to come adjacent to the German front, marking their positions, and reconnoitering for potential weak zones. Messages were sent to Popov and Malinovsky to begin making final preparations to advance.

The sound of artillery fire was the first dull rumble of distant thunder that would soon become a raging storm in the south, but this time it was on the Middle Donets. Another diversionary operation would be launched there, a mission given to Shumilov's 7th Guards Army.

The Germans had been digging in on that front, fortifying their line on the Upper Donets, but that work had not extended all the way south. West of Shebelkino, the Russians had identified a weaker segment of the line, and in the early hours before sunrise, the men of 73 and 78th Guards Rifle Divisions, and all the armor attached to that army, struck across the river against the lines of the German 111th Infantry Division.

The large bridgehead on the Donets bend above Chuguyev was being held by both 3rd Guard and 3rd Shock Armies, and the former launched an attack near Bolshaya Babka, backed up by the 3rd Tank Corps. At the same time,

3rd Shock attacked further south with the support of 7th Tank Corps sent over the river the previous night by General Popov. These three attacks were not strong enough to pose any serious threat to Kharkov, but were instead designed to attempt to lure German reserves to this segment of the line—away from the main offensive being readied in the south....

Named for a Russian General of the 18th Century, the buildup for Operation *Rumyantsev* proceeded at a methodical pace. Then, in the early grey hours of May 27, the guns were elevating on the rear area breakthrough artillery, the heavy steel barrels rising to meet the dawn. There would be no less than nine heavy gun regiments, an equal number of Katyusha regiments, and several mortar regiments to make the initial opening barrage. The Germans would hear the movement of tanks and troops, vehicles rumbling in the grey, but no attack would come before sunrise.

General Vatutin was a very patient man that day. His would be the first of two planned counterblows, designed to envelop Kharkov and halt the German attack in the north.

* * *

When General Hoth was informed of the attacks, he nodded his head, as if he expected them. “Is anything serious?” he asked.

“Only in the sector west of Martovaya, near Bolshaya Babka. There’s a lot of armor reported there—at least two Corps.

“Which is why I have positioned the two *Reichsführer* Brigades right behind the line there. They should be able to handle that. Send them in. And what about the attack further north?”

“The only serious area is with the 167th, but General Trierenburg believes he can use local reserves to hold the line.”

“Very well. Let me know if anything changes.”

“There is one more thing, sir.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve received three separate reports of enemy movement on the southern front between the Donets and Oskol.”

“Fighting?”

“No sir, just movement.”

Hoth thought about that. The enemy might be pulling something out to send north. Then again, this could be a buildup for the counterattack

Manstein warned me about.

“Where is 502nd Schwerepanzer Battalion?”

“On the road southwest of Kharkov, sir.”

“Send it to Chuguyev. The 503rd Battalion is already there with 3rd Panzergrenadier Division. Tell General Graser that I have just upgraded his outfit to a full Panzer Division.” Hoth smiled, a spark in his close-set eyes, and then he adjusted his officers cap, picked up his gloves and headed for his staff car. He was driving into Borisovka to confer with the 42nd Infantry Korps commander, General Dostler. Hermann Balck had called him to request infantry support so he could move his division north, and he wanted to see if the enemy pocket could be held in place with thinner lines.

“The attack last night by Hausser compressed that pocket considerably,” he said to Dostler. “2nd SS needs to get up north, along with 9th Panzer. So now I want your infantry to secure the entire perimeter. As for Gebhard’s 72nd Division—send it to relieve Balck on the left shoulder.”

As a further precaution, Hoth sent word to the other two mobile divisions in 57th Panzerkorps, 17th Panzer and 29th Panzergrenadier. They had been positioned near the Oskol River south of Kupyansk, and he ordered them to tighten up and deploy for possible offensive operations.

“You want me to attack?” asked von Etterlin of the 17th Division.

“Not in accordance with the Habicht Operation. No, prepare for defensive counterattacks in the event we get any trouble down there. They’ve been building up in the center of the line. If anything happens, it will start with the artillery. Keep me informed.”

Yes, it would start with the artillery....

Part V

Rumyantsev

*“The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid
and deeds left undone.”*

—Harriet Beecher Stowe

Chapter 13

On the Morning of May 27th, the real Soviet answer to Operation Zitadelle began with that rain of steel. The bombardment lasted an hour, and to infantry, even in prepared positions, there is nothing more fearsome. Enemy infantry could be engaged with rifles and machineguns, and tanks could be seen approaching and fought with Panzerfausts and PAK AT guns. But artillery fire seemed to come from nowhere, unseen, yet presaged by the roar of the distant guns, and the closer whine of falling shells. Then chaos visited, and the only thing an infantryman could do was scramble for any cover he could find.

The shock and din of such a bombardment is earth-shaking, mercifully loud to smother the screams of the men unlucky enough to receive a heavy round close enough to kill, or worse, to maim for life. Human bodies are tossed into the air like the earth, and steel shrapnel flays and eviscerates anything in its path. Tanks provide some refuge, unless they receive a close or direct hit. But a 152mm round can even lift a 40-ton vehicle from the ground with the sheer force of the explosion. Shock and fire, blood, dismemberment and death, rule the hour.

Then, after what seemed like an interminable deluge of high explosive madness, the barrage lifts. The last rounds fall, and the heavy smoke drifts on the wind, the smell of death thick on that pallid veil of fear. Men who lay buried in soot and debris, crouching in any depression in the ground they could find, slowly begin to move, like reanimated corpses, groping for weapons, lost helmets, blinking bleary eyed in the acrid smoke, some with blood running down from their ruptured eardrums.

They do not hear the distant shout of tens of thousands, deep throated voices rising with the dawn—*Urahhhhhhh* ! It is a sound that others spared from deafness have heard for years on the *Ostfront* , the battle cry of their enemy as he came rushing over the sodden, shell pocked fields. Behind them comes the grind of heavy metal tracks—tanks!

Between the Donets and the Oskol Rivers, four German divisions, the *Nordland* SS, 50th, 198th and 336th Infantry, held a front of about 55 kilometers. That was a little over 40,000 men, perhaps half that number on

the front line, which was a density of about 350 men per kilometer on the outer crust of the defense. Another 30,000 men were in reserve. On the left flank at Chuguyev was Graser's reinforced 3rd Panzergrenadier Division, and on the right near Kupyansk the remaining two divisions of 57 Panzer Korps waited behind the infantry, seven German divisions in all, some 70,000 troops with 330 tanks. On the other side were six Soviet Armies, the entire Donets Front, totaling 25 divisions and 225,000 men under arms, with just over 600 tanks and another 120 assault guns.

At Chuguyev, General Graser had informed Hoth of the bombardment, and now he had to decide what to do about it. There was a strong attack developing north of that city, and the SS *Nordland*, the first division on the line in the gap, was also going to need help. He had no choice but to divide his forces into two Kampfgruppen, sending one to each sector.

On the right, Etterlin's 17th Panzer was perhaps the strongest division in reserve, for the 504th *Schwerepanzer* Battalion had been added to give it three full battalions of armor. 2nd Shock Army was hitting the 336th Division, its lines anchored on the Oskol River. The 29th Panzergrenadier Division was there at Berezovka to stabilize that sector, and his division would have to mind the center. Should he attack at once, in an effort to stop the blood flowing as soon as possible and hold the line? Something told him that this attack was too massive for his single division to ever master.

If he waited, the enemy might soon break the infantry front, but then he might have the chance to attack the flank of anything that came through. That was what Manstein had done earlier.... But Manstein had five divisions, including Steiner's entire Korps and *Grossdeutschland*. That thought gave him a chill, and he realized that if this was as great a torrent as it seemed, he would be swamped if he rushed in now.

So, he waited. In fact, he got on the radio and told General Muller of the 198th Division that he should fold back his lines towards the stream that ran south to the scene of the last great clash between these gladiators, the blackened town of Volkov Yar. Etterlin thought he could make that thin water barrier the line of his shoulder defense, for the enemy was coming through. It was only a matter of time.

This time, he thought, we are not waiting south of the Donets with Manstein and Steiner, in just the perfect position to strike the enemy flank in great strength. No, this time Steiner is over a hundred kilometers to the north, half way to Oboyan, and locked in a death grip with the entire Voronezh

Front. And I am sitting here alone, the Panzerkorps scattered about with no real force to do anything until the bull is out of the pen.

So... He wants Volkov Yar back as a point of honor, and after that, the Donets....

* * *

That was what Manstein knew implicitly. When the reports came in to his headquarters in Kharkov, he swore aloud, so completely frustrated with Hitler's insistence that the threat in the south could be safely ignored. It was clear to him that they were now fighting a very different war. The Soviets could still be moved. When sufficient force was concentrated against them, they could be hurt. But gone were the days when the Wehrmacht would rampage through their lines, trapping hundreds of thousands in massive pockets and gobbling up huge amounts of their homeland in the process.

Three days of hard fighting had produced results in the north, but the enemy continued to amaze by producing yet another army to throw in Steiner's path. This time the formation was designated 8th Guards.

We lined up seven good divisions, he thought, and the offensive took us 40 kilometers in three days. Now, however, I'm afraid I must do everything in my power to see that it does not go one step further.

He was on the telephone to Knobelsdorff immediately. "Trouble in the south," he said flatly. "I am going to send OKW a strong recommendation that *Zitadelle* be canceled. The Panzers are going to be needed elsewhere."

"Cancelled? I Just got Balck moving north again, and with 9th Panzer back, we're making some progress. Steiner took Pokrovka last night."

"Well let me put it this way. Before we ever get to Kursk, the Russians will be over the Donets again, and may even have Kharkov. There's been a major breakthrough in the south, and Kirchner does not have the resources to handle the situation, just as I warned."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I must present Hitler with a *fait accompli*. I want you to begin a fighting withdrawal. See if you can get back by using only two divisions on your front. Send the third against that pocket. We've swallowed the rat, now we have to digest it. As for Steiner, I will ask him to do the same. Our goal now is to restore the front along a line Belgorod, Tomarovka and on to Model's front. But I want to kill what we've caught in the process."

“What about the south? Will you need my troops there?”

“Not yet. I’m going to move Steiner to the Middle Donets and pick a suitable place to cross. We cannot get south to try and stop this attack, so we will strike into its rear area communication zone. Unfortunately, that is not Kursk. Oh... One more thing. I’ll need *Grossdeutschland* .”

“I understand... Should I wait for authorization from OKW?”

“There’s no time for that. I am the theater commander, and I will take full responsibility. Now move.”

The message Manstein would send to OKW was forming in his mind, but he realized he should be in no great hurry to send it. He knew what Hitler’s reaction would be—a stand fast order in the north, or worse, an order that the attack must continue. He needed to get a credible force south as fast as he possibly could, and without interference from the Führer. To do this, without either consulting or obtaining the blessing of OKW, was perhaps the riskiest thing he had done in his long struggle to determine the strategy of this war. Yet if he did not act, the consequences could be very grave.

To try and cover his withdrawal, and confuse the enemy as to his real intentions, he ordered a staff radio operator to send out a message in the clear that the enemy pocket must be destroyed, and units would be detached from the front to complete this mission at once. It would have an unintended consequence as well, instilling the Soviet front line units with the fervor to reach their comrades before that could happen.

The withdrawal began after midnight on the 27th, and the following morning, he sent a terse statement to OKW indicating that strong enemy counterattacks have materialized along the upper and middle Donets, and that certain units had to be detached to deal with them. He asked OKW to closely monitor the situation in the south, wanting to focus their attention there, where he knew the more astute Generals would not fail to appreciate the danger that thrust now represented.

The Soviets finally realized what was happening on the morning of the 28th. Their patrols indicated that the German heavy units were nowhere to be found, and the front was now only being held by a screen of AT guns and small delaying forces. Rokossovsky smiled inwardly, and gave orders to Katukov to push hard to relieve the trapped 5th Shock Group. Chiukov was ordered to retake Pokrovka, and put strong pressure on the enemy front wherever he found it.

Pulling out of a major offensive and assembling the divisions to move

south was no small task. *Grossdeutschland* Division was the first to move, reaching the vicinity of Belgorod mid-day on the 28th. Both 1st and 2nd SS pulled out, with Totenkopf standing as rearguard, and now they were organizing into march columns. Hermann Balck had moved his elite 11th Panzer Division near Tomarovka, ready to attack the pocket or move elsewhere if so ordered. The heavy brigades of KG Decker, and the Ferdinands, were able to reach the rail line near Belgorod, and a train was waiting there to move them south.

The situation on the Middle Donets was far from secure. Several of the spoiling attacks made there had developed into serious penetrations. 7th Guards Army had pushed all the way into the town of Murom, 10 kilometers from the river. 3rd Guards Army had forced a big inroad near Stary Saltov, pushed the Germans out of Bolshaya Babka, and was grappling with both *Reichsführer* Brigades and a strong KG from 3rd Panzergrenadier Division. South of the big bend in the Donets, it was disaster.

The main Soviet attack had blown a hole in the line that was now 16 kilometers wide, and there was no hope that it could be closed. The SS *Nordland* , with the rest of 3rd Panzergrenadier Division, had been forced into a cauldron that was trying to protect the approaches to Chuguyev through Malinovka, but there was nothing to guard the line of the Donets as it wound its way down to Zimyevev.

Further east, von Etterlin's wise decision not to commit his 17th Panzer Division had allowed him to organize a new defensive front along that minor river flowing through Volkov Yar, which he now held. The 173rd Reserve Infantry Division had come up from Balakleya to make contact with his southernmost flank, and so now the Germans had some semblance of a line all the way from the Donets at Balakleya, in a wide arc through Volkov Yar and then east to the Oskol river south of Kupyansk.

Vatutin was now in a most enviable position. He had strong mobile forces at his command, moving rapidly through a clean breakthrough, and a host of choices before him. He could turn south to Volkov Yar, reclaiming that town and smashing the 17th Panzer Division in the process. He could bend north and attempt to force the Donets at Chuguyev, taking the most direct route to Kharkov. Or he could make a wider envelopment as Kuznetsov had done with Operation Red Star, and push for a crossing at Zimyevev. Lastly, he could forsake all of that and simply drive for Andreyevka on the Donets, where Popov had achieved his bridgehead the previous month.

That choice would be determined as much by what the Germans did, and both Rokossovsky and Vatutin knew who they were up against as they spoke on the phone that afternoon.

“They have put their foot in the bear trap with this offensive,” said Rokossovsky. “I did not think they would accommodate us, but they did. Nothing could be better. What is your situation?”

“Operation Comet has broken through,” said Vatutin. “We must now select an objective that we can take, and keep.”

“Reconnaissance reports there is little defense in Kharkov,” said Rokossovsky, “but they are now concentrating a lot of Steiner’s troops near Belgorod. They could move by rail south very quickly.”

Vatutin thought for a moment. “If we go for Kharkov, by any route, what will Manstein do?”

“That is clear enough,” said Rokossovsky. “He will send enough troops to the city to make it difficult for us, while trying to find a way to cut off your forces and compel a withdrawal.”

“He would have to get very far south to do that,” said Vatutin. “Our spoiling attacks at Volchansk and Sary Saltov were meant to prevent him from crossing the Donets there.”

“Yes, but he may still try.” Rokossovsky was hedging his bets. “I still think it is premature to attempt a major crossing of the Donets. We could not sustain it. No, if we do cross, I think we must go for Kharkov, and leave off any idea of reaching the Dnieper. Choose the route that serves you best, but be ready for a street fight if you get there.”

Chapter 14

The situation reports from the front came as one shock wave after another, and Hitler's mood went from elation, to guarded optimism, to frustrated anger.

"Seven panzer divisions!" he exclaimed. "Steiner's entire Korps! How could they fail to break through?"

"My Führer, they did break through, as the map clearly shows, but swallowing two Soviet armies was bound to slow the advance. Then two more Armies appear to replace those that were pocketed, and the enemy was able to restore the front. But that is not the issue this hour. There is grave danger in the south." Zeitzler was remaining calm, seeing that Hitler was a boiling kettle that could pop off in a rage at any moment.

"What about 57th Panzer Korps?"

"It was clearly unable to stop this enemy counterattack."

"What is wrong with my divisions? We clear the Kuban, soundly defeat Volkov after that, but we cannot go to Baku or Astrakhan. The Soviets were all but beaten last November. Now they attack us with armies that we knew nothing about! Manstein drives them back, but here they come once again. When will we settle this matter so I can proceed with Operation Downfall?"

"General Manstein is marshalling forces for counteroperations at this hour," said Zeitzler.

"Yes, I am quite sure of that. Now you will tell me that Operation *Zitadelle* must be canceled. Yes? That is the only place such forces exist. Steiner, Steiner, *Steiner!*" Hitler slapped the table with the palm of his hand. Is he the only General I have who can get the job done? I should remove this General Manstein. All he does is issue grave warnings and talk of yielding more and more ground to the enemy. You will not hear such talk on the lips of a man like Steiner."

He stopped, his hand quivering, blinking at the latest situation reports. Then he seemed to master his anger and pointed at the map. "Where? Where is that attack going?"

"We believe it is a second attempt to take Kharkov, said Zeitzler. "Thus far, they have not moved towards the lower Donets, but that could change."

Hitler shook his head. "We went to take Kursk from them, and now they

come for Kharkov. Well, they will not have it! Order Steiner to stop this attack at once. *Zitadelle* is a complete failure! Not one of you had the good sense to provide adequate reserves to prevent this enemy attack. This is sheer incompetence!”

Zeitzler stiffened at the remark, his upper lip taut. “I must remind you that General Manstein argued strongly that Operation *Habicht* should have been conducted first to dissipate the enemy’s offensive potential in the south, but he was overruled. He predicted this move by the enemy, but it was not his order that decided the matter.”

“Is that so.... Now you wish to blame your Führer for this debacle? Nonsense! It is clear that no provision was made to adequately guard the southern portion of the front. Do not argue with me, General Zeitzler. There is no time for that now. How will this new enemy offensive be stopped?”

“Steiner has suspended operations and is marshaling his Korps to move south. General Manstein has also ordered *Grossdeutschland* Division to move directly to Kharkov. If they want that city, they will not get their hands on it easily. He vows to fight there to the last man, but they will not take Kharkov. Dietrich is moving a Kampfgruppe to forestall their advance on the city should they cross the Donets and move in that direction.”

“What is this division?” Hitler pointed to a spot on the southwest edge of the Tomarovka pocket.

“That is 11th Panzer Division.”

“Order it to attack the pocket, and annihilate it.”

“Are you certain we should use that division? It is one of our very best in the regular army.”

“Do not ask me if I am certain when I give an order, General Zeitzler. Simply see that it is carried out. I want those armies destroyed. That will at least offer some consolation for the failure to reach Kursk!”

As the hours passed, Manstein began to realize that there would be no miraculous counterblow this time. There were simply too many places along the line where the enemy was pressing and expanding bridgeheads over the Donets. Even though these attacks did not have secondary forces available to exploit their successes, he knew that he could not ignore them.

Grossdeutschland Division arrived at Kharkov before sunrise on the 29th of May. It had been only four days since it formed up to make the grand attack north towards Kursk. Now here it was in Kharkov, the Führer’s Fire Brigade, and with orders to protect the city at all costs. To the east, the two

Reichsführer Brigades had tried to stop 3rd Guards Army, but there were now undefended penetrations both north and south of its positions. The 196th Infantry Division was now retreating over the bridges at Chuguyev, with the SS *Nordland* Division and 3rd Panzergrenadiers, though elements of both those last two divisions were still trying to disengage.

The entire front between Stary Saltov and Chuguyev was therefore in a state of disruption, and he knew it would take one strong division to stabilize the situation. Then, north of that mess, opposite Volchansk, the Soviet 7th Guards Army had doggedly expanded its bridgehead. One spike after another was being driven into the wall, and they had to be hammered down. He could not do this and still have forces available in sufficient strength to launch a counterattack. However, if he did use Steiner's divisions to push back these penetrations, they would end up on the Donets, with the possibility they could then cross as he had envisioned.

So it was that Paul Hausser's 2nd SS Division would be sent against the 7th Guards, and Sepp Dietrich was ordered to get his troops on the trains near Belgorod and move south as soon as possible. They would flow through Kharkov that morning and continue on south to prepare a blocking position, as the enemy was expected to cross the Donets that morning. 3rd SS would have to stay in the north and hold the shoulder against 5th Guards Army.

That left the push being made by the 3rd Shock Group north of Chuguyev needing attention, and so Manstein ordered General Hörnlein to put together a Kampfgruppe and halt the enemy advance. He chose the Fusilier Regiment, augmented by two panzer companies, half the division artillery and three companies of the recon battalion. This attack would continue to pull in additional assets, but the whole of the Grenadier Regiment, and most of the Pioneers, would remain at Kharkov. Hörnlein was free with his panzers, because that morning all the Panthers of KG Decker pulled into Kharkov, with the two battalions of heavy Ferdinand Panzerjags.

That morning Mikhail Katukov accelerated his attack toward the trapped 5th Shock Group. He was relentless, using 3rd Mech and 31st Tank Corps to batter his way through the defensive lines of the 9th Panzer Division, and drive within five kilometers of the pocket. Hearing their comrades charging to their rescue, 5th Shock Army commander, Kamenko, ordered an attack to the north. His army had been weakened by days of fighting, with ammunition for the artillery nearly depleted, severe losses. 5th Tank Army was even worse off, with its 24th and 25th Tank Corps largely destroyed. But the 29th

Tank Corps still had some punch, and it threw in an attack to try and break out.

The rescue of that army was going to be inevitable. The German front trying to contain those two Soviet armies to the north could not hold, and casualties and equipment losses, particularly the panzers, were mounting. Balck was advised of the situation and decided that he might do better by reinforcing the outer perimeter, instead of grinding his way through the lines of 5th Shock Army. He stopped 31st Tank Corps, in a massive tank battle at the village of Novocherkass, the heavy Lions dueling with T-34/85's. 100th Tank brigade would lose 15 of 30 tanks in that fight, finding the new German armor just too good in spite of the many upgrades made to the reliable T-34.

Tank shock had again shifted to the Germans, and this would likely hold true for the remainder of the spring and summer until more Kirov-I models could be produced. Yet not to be outdone, Katukov shifted a full regiment of his 3rd Mech Corps against a battalion of Panzergrenadiers from 9th Panzer, and opened another small hole five kilometers to the west. The fast-moving infantry halftracks surged through the gap, quickly racing to the northern edge of the pocket. 29th Tank Corps had been concentrated there, and now the attack began from two sides.

Those mobile units would be among the first to break out, joyfully linking up with their comrades, but the slower moving infantry in the pocket would fare much worse. That night the linkup was complete, but only two rifle divisions and the Guard Cavalry would be rescued. The 300th and 315th Divisions had been completely destroyed, along with much of the artillery, three brigade sized units, and the service troops. All told, the Soviets would lose the equivalent of two Tank Corps and four rifle divisions in that pocket, but they saved Kursk, and gave the army every good prospect for the liberation of Kharkov, which was now uppermost on Vatutin's mind.

It would soon be on Manstein's mind as well.

* * *

Further south, *Das Reich* had managed to seal off the breach over the Donets west of Volchansk, but not before a brigade of Soviet tank hunters had slipped through and raced west. They split into smaller company sized units, fanning out, intent on wrecking any rear area troops they came upon. Some of Hausser's recon companies had just come south, and they went into

action against the SU-122s, overmatched on firepower, but having the agility to out maneuver the larger beasts and get good side shots with their 75mm guns. They had knocked out 9 of the Russian SPGs but then learned that one battalion had moved north towards Kazaye Lopan, where they had achieved their primary mission—to tear up the rail line between Belgorod and Kharkov.

These units had 152mm guns, and they found and routed a battalion of rail workers that had been repairing the line, then fired at the railway embankment itself, blasting segments and sending both steel and wood ties cascading into the air. This was the life line that Steiner had used to get three of his heavy divisions rapidly south, but now it was cut. It seemed a small thing, those twin steel rails disrupted over a 10-kilometer segment of the line, but it was going to matter. The Germans would suddenly realize that they had lost the advantage of interior lines, losing the ability to rapidly shift forces north and south as they had just done.

* * *

Sepp Dietrich telephoned Manstein in Kharkov, and it was not good news. “My Division is spread out over a 28-kilometer front,” he said. “We’ve halted their advance towards Kharkov, but I simply cannot concentrate to counterattack. They have two Mech Corps here, very fast and agile troops in halftracks. There are more motorized infantry coming up as well.”

“And there will be tanks coming,” said Manstein. “This is no good. Steiner’s entire Korps is spread out to deal with one crisis point after another. We should have simply given them Kharkov. If we did so, we know they would come for it and then we might mass on their northern flank and make some headway. We’re just putting out fires.”

“They’re going to get around my right flank,” said Dietrich, making things plain and simple.”

There was a long silence while Manstein considered. Bad news had piled on top of bad news. He had learned the rail line to Belgorod had been cut, and though his forces had sealed off the holes in the dike, the water was spilling over the top! To make matters worse, the Army itself was now split in two. From Hollidt’s left flank anchored on Balakleya, to Dietrich’s flank south of Kharkov, there was a 60-mile segment of the line along the Middle Donets that had a single German infantry division holding, the 36th sent from

Army Group Center. That, with a few *Ostruppen* and Luftwaffe battalions at key crossing points, was the only thing to stop the Russians from crossing the Middle Donets and driving for the Dnieper if they choose to do so.

“Alright,” said Manstein. “Hold your line for the time being. I am going to pull back the units at Chuguyev. We’ll establish a tighter perimeter near Kharkov. Otherwise, if they go around your flank, they will be in the city in two days. Stand fast, until I can get those units back. Then be ready to move quickly when I send you the order.”

Manstein had already taken the great risk of ordering a halt to Operation *Zitadelle* and pulling all of Steiner’s troops out to shore up the Middle Donets. Now he was contemplating an even greater risk, and one that might very well cost him his head. He needed to give the enemy ground to reform his front with infantry, and get his panzers free to concentrate for an attack. If he had his way, *Grossdeutschland* Division would not have gone to Kharkov, nor would Sepp Dietrich be making his plaintive call in the night from his overextended front in the south. He would have mustered them all in one place, and if that meant the enemy would take Kharkov, so be it.

The only reason he had acted as he did was to appease Hitler. He knew the loss of the city would send the Führer into a terrible rage, moaning over the political ramifications, particularly after the demise of 5th Panzer Army in Tunisia. It would be a very hard blow to Army morale as a whole, but he held fast to the belief that he could correct the situation, just as he had done the previous month. He had been Hitler’s magician, always coming up with some plan and countermeasure for every crisis. But one must first have a hat in hand to pull out a rabbit, and he needed to concentrate his forces, build something to fight with, and quickly.

He had hoped the enemy would take their breakthrough and reach for the lower Donets again. That would have made things so much easier. Instead, they had opted to envelop Kharkov from the south, and with each hour the gap between Dietrich and Hollidt would grow ever wider. If they were to suddenly produce yet another reserve army to exploit that gap....

There is only one other reserve I can call upon now. Hitler cancelled Operation *Eisenfall* and pulled the 5th SS out of Syria a month ago. It was reassigned to Steiner, but with orders to convert to a full Panzer Division. Nothing was available from the factories by the time it arrived, but the 24th Panzerkorps left a good amount of older equipment on the Dnieper when it was recalled home to rebuild. General Gille has had his division picking over

that equipment for some weeks now, and getting some much needed rest after their visit to Damascus. Now I think I must call home Steiner's lost sheep. I will also need to recall 3rd SS from the northern segment of my front. If that means Kempf must fall back on Kharkov, then that is what I will order. Should Hitler interfere to prevent this, then I will have to tender my resignation. I will fight the way I know I must, come what may.

Only God help the Army if it comes to the moment when I hand the Führer back this Field Marshal's baton. I wonder how it will feel in his feeble hand?

Chapter 15

Manstein had good reason for his misgivings, for Operation Rummyantsev was planned to have two phases. Vatutin's new Donets Front would lead in the south, and it had achieved a great breakthrough, halting the German offensive in the north, and forcing Manstein to recall Steiner to the defense of Kharkov. While this was going on, Rokossovsky liberated all he could of the trapped 5th Shock Group, and then began to prepare his armies in that sector for renewed offensive operations.

Katukov's attack was halted and his three mobile corps began to regroup. The surviving 29th Tank Corps was reorganizing and waiting for fresh supplies, and STAVKA was releasing new formations from general reserve to build up for the attack. Some would begin to introduce new concepts debated and adopted by the Soviet army, which was rapidly adapting as they learned the deadly art of maneuver warfare.

A great deal of discussion was dedicated to the lessons learned from the Battle of Volkov Yar. The Soviets analyzed both their strengths and weaknesses, particularly within their armored corps. They realized that the German technology curve for tank design had caught up and surpassed their own efforts. The German Lion was now a proven and highly effective tank, with the VK-75mm model a match for the T-34, and the VK-88mm model superior to the newest T-34/85 when it came to engagement range and protection. Only the Kirov-I was a match for it, and the German Tiger. The same could be said for the German Panther, which was another strong medium tank capable of matching and often besting all models of the T-34.

The Soviets had the advantage of mass, with most line Tank Corps fielding three tank brigades, with two battalions each, with the Guards Tank Corps and latest Line Corps (29th and 31st) having three tank Brigades with three battalions each. Yet the weak point of the current Tank Corps structure was its lack of adequate infantry support. Even though it had a full brigade of motorized infantry attached, in actual practice, the Soviets found that the truck mounted infantry could not keep up with the tanks, particularly in cross country movement and definitely in winter conditions. This saw the tanks outpacing the infantry, and then finding themselves alone when facing the combined arms formations of the German Panzer Divisions.

The first attempt to redress the need for infantry in faster moving formations was the concept of the Motor Rifle Division. This was an effort to emulate the German Motorized Divisions, but it was soon deemed to be ineffective for the kind of shock and exploit armored warfare the Soviets were now contemplating, a doctrine that would be known as Deep Operations.

It had three regiments of motorized infantry, but in the older trucks which were often roadbound, its mobility was limited. General Mikhail Katukov, perhaps one of the best practitioners of the Mobile Art the Russians had, never liked the formation, claiming that it was too slow, and too weak to fight with the tank corps, or make any real contribution to a tank army. He was proven correct at Volkov Yar, where the 2nd Motor Rifle Division, under Ermakov, had been savaged by the German counterattack, and largely destroyed. The infantry had been too sluggish in cross country movement, and lacked adequate AT support for defense. It was basically just a faster rifle division, but was not suitable for the role of exploitation, and could only be deployed in a support role if assigned to a tank army.

Katukov had made his arguments long before Ermakov paid the price on the field of battle. In early 1942, seeing the sluggishness of the Soviet Army, its inability to react to the fast-moving German Panzer Divisions, Katukov spoke up.

“We need mobile infantry that can maneuver and operate with our tank corps. This is what the Germans have in their Panzer Divisions. We must do the same.”

“We already have the Motor Rifle Division,” said Zhukov.

“They are ineffective, nothing more than a fast rifle division. I need something that can give me cross country infantry support when I run with my T-34s. We need to put the infantry into a halftrack, or better yet, a fully tracked vehicle.”

The Soviet answer to that problem had been the development of the Mech Corps, of which there were now eight in the Army, often designated “Guards.” This saw all the infantry mounted in halftracks using the new ZIS-42M Cross Country truck, with its rear propulsion being tracked. Some models even mounted a potent 37mm Open Topped AA Gun, which could also be used as an infantry support weapon. Very fast, and with good cross country movement capability, the Mech Corps was the perfect exploitation force, and so the Soviets built their Tank Armies with two Tank Corps for the

breakthrough, and one Mech Corps to exploit and breach in the enemy line. The only liability was that the Mech Corps did not have as much armor support, fielding only one tank brigade, but at least it was given the better T-34/85, and sometimes even had a company of the newest Kirov-I's added. Katukov argued that all the existing Motor Rifle Divisions should be converted to Mech Corps.

“Even if we can provide enough ZIS-42M's to make the conversion,” he said, “that formation will still lack anti-tank support. Why not try a new concept in the way we add that armor protection to the Mech Corps?”

“What do you mean?” asked Zhukov.

“Well, at present, we assign a full armored brigade to our Guards Mech Corps. Leave that alone, but for the Motor Rifle Division conversions, integrate the armor within the new infantry battalions using the ZIS-42M. This way they will always have support at hand when they fight, and not have to wait for the armor brigade to send tanks when needed.”

“Will this not disperse the striking power of the armor?” asked Zhukov.

“Yes, but this new Motor Rifle Corps will not be a breakthrough force. It is an exploitation force, with both speed and staying power, like our Mech Corps. Let me build one such Corps and battle test it in the field.”

“Very Well, do so. I will see that you get the next shipment of the new ZIS-M42's, but for this role, what tank will you select?”

“It will not need the breakthrough armor, only the T-34, and the latest models if available. That said, I will take whatever I can get. If we had a real armored personnel carrier, and one with a decent main gun added for support, then we would not have to shuffle in tanks as I now suggest. We would be solving the problem by building the fighting quality we want into the infantry vehicle, instead of by simply restructuring an existing Mech Corps.”

That remark caught Zhukov's attention. “A real APC? The ZIS-42 is not enough? Explain.”

“What I would like is an infantry carrier, but not a halftrack. It should be built on a fully tracked tank chassis, which has much better armor to protect the infantry from both small arms, mortars, and enemy artillery as it advances in an attack. The ZIS-42 is good for cross country movement, but it has a very high silhouette in combat, and becomes an easy target. We need a new design—with a low silhouette, and better armor than a halftrack. Put a 76mm gun on it somehow, and we've got a real *Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty* —an infantry fighting vehicle! It would be fast enough to stay in close contact with

conventional armor, more durable than any infantry carrier we now have, and it would have real punch, as much hitting power as a T-34. Only with this vehicle, the infantry rides *inside*, instead of jumping on top of the tank as they often do now.”

That was a far-reaching concept, years, perhaps decades ahead of its time, but Katukov had seen the strengths and liabilities of the Soviet armored forces first hand, and he knew instinctively what was needed. General Zhukov was deeply impressed.

“I like this idea,” he said. “If we could build such a vehicle, how would you design it?”

“It must be an infantry carrier, fast, with good protection, and with a main gun on it of at least a 76mm caliber. Being fully tracked, it will have good cross-country performance, and make the tracks wide like those on the T-34 for winter conditions. It must not be too heavy, so the front must be sloped to improve the defensive capability of its armor. Since it will have a gun turret, I would incline that slope forward, and not backward as in our T-34. Then the turret could be moved forward, allowing more room for the infantry squad behind it in the main body. There would then be a hatch in the back, not on the top, to allow the infantry to deploy safely while under fire, and they should all have SMG’s.”

“Interesting,” said Zhukov. “Very interesting.... Let us try to build such a vehicle. Yes? In fact, go to Siberia yourself, to Chelyabinsk, and direct the design of this vehicle. I can spare you from the front for a few months this winter.”

That conversation had taken place in June of 1942, and a prototype that was known only as “Object 700” was drafted and designed at the Kurgan Machine Building Plant, east of Chelyabinsk. A certain intelligence officer, Tyrenkov, soon became aware of the project’s existence, and when he brought the matter to Vladimir Karpov, the cagy Siberian decided to speed things along. He approached Sergei Kirov, who was desperate for Siberian manpower throughout 1942, and made a deal with him that his Siberian Army would get tank production support in exchange.

“I can even assist your design process in that regard,” he told Kirov. “You have seen things, from another way this history could have played out. You have seen the Russia that Stalin would have built, the gulags, the mass executions and purges, the assassinations. Well I must tell you that others have seen these things as well. Volkov calls himself the “Prophet,” and not

without good reason. He has long sight, and even as you have, he has seen things from days that have not yet come to pass.”

“Yes,” said Kirov. “I was warned of this by Admiral Volsky and Mister Fedorov. “He is from the upper floor of the inn, in a manner of speaking.”

“A clever way of putting it,” said Karpov. “You should also that I am from the upper floor of the inn as well. I have seen things from another time.”

That conversation had set Soviet tank design off in the right direction, and the initial aim was to get the better tank designs conceived and built earlier than they were in the real history. The Kirov-I was already over six months early, but when Karpov learned about Object 700, he was quite surprised. “That idea wasn’t realized until the late 1950s,” he told Tyrenkov. “Let us see what we can do to help it along.”

A year had passed since these events took place. The SU-76 Self Propelled Gun had been a starting point, but that chassis had its frontal armor sloped the wrong way, and it had a rear mounted turret. But a similar chassis was designed, and shepherded along by Karpov. Within that long year, prototypes were produced and tested, and alterations were made, adding gun ports so the mounted infantry could fire from inside the vehicle if necessary.

Instead of trying to provide heavy armor against main tank guns, it was deemed that protection from shell fragments, small arms and machineguns would be sufficient, which kept the weight down to 15 to 18 tons. Against enemy tanks, the vehicle would look to deploy hull down, and take advantage of its very low silhouette. It took time and sweat, but the urgency of the war, and Karpov’s ability to aid in the design, pushed it along. By mid-1943, the Soviets were going to have what Mikhail Katukov had asked for so long ago, and they would call it by the initials of the words he had used to first describe it to General Zhukov—*Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty* —the B.M.P. While it was not the same vehicle that the Soviets would build after the war, it incorporated similar ideas in design and function.

So, after Volkov Yar, the Soviets decided to discontinue building more Motorized Rifle Divisions, and converted any remaining in the field to the new Mechanized Corps concept. As Zhukov had promised, Mikhail Katukov would get the first production run on the AFV he had asked for, and by May of 1943, there were just enough to equip nine battalions. The first thought was that they could use those brigades to replace the motorized infantry troops in three separate Tank Corps, but Katukov protested.

“No,” he said. “Let me build one new fast Mech Corps, the 5th Guards.

We already have three Motorized Rifle Brigades in Popov's old group that are trained to operate with armor. There is my infantry. All they need now is this new B.M.P. and some support assets."

The 5th Guards Mech was created, and it had been held in the Voronezh Front reserve by Rokossovsky. Now, after learning of the heavy losses to 5th Shock Army, and the destruction of the 24th and 25th Tank Corps, he sent it to Katukov to augment his already powerful 1st Guards Army. A written message was handed to him when the Corps commander reported to Katukov for duty.

"Here now is the force you conceived and built after a long year of trial and effort. Use it well."

It was signed Sergei Kirov, General Secretary of the Soviet Union.

With this new Corps in hand, and with the Germans pulling most of their Panzer divisions south to defend Kharkov, Rokossovsky now ordered Katukov to reclaim the ground he had taken in April during Operation Red Star. *"After reorganizing, you will continue your assault with 1st Tank Army, Chiukov's 8th Guards, and adjacent infantry armies, with the aim of breaking the enemy front, retaking Tomarovka, and pushing south to compel the enemy to yield his position on the upper Donets."*

General Katukov's troops were ready for action. The three mobile corps in his own army were still in good shape, and now he would inherit the last surviving member of the old 5th Tank Army, the 29th Tank Corps, and his new 5th Guards Mech. As five mobile corps were too much for a single army staff to coordinate, he would now reassign forces to build two separate tank armies, and the newcomer would be called 5th Guards Tank, in honor of the old army that had died to give it birth.

So even though the Germans had delivered a very heavy blow with their abortive Operation *Zitadelle*, largely destroying the operational capability of the 5th Shock Group, it was a case of Hercules versus the Hydra. STAVKA still had considerable resources, long husbanded by Zhukov over the long winter lull where January through March of 1943 saw little action on the East Front. The Soviets had taken the enemy blow, and were now delivering a strong counterattack aimed at encircling Kharkov, Operation *Rumyantsev*.

Phase II of that plan was about to begin.

Part VI

Confrontation

“Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand...”

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Chapter 16

The attack in the north would come like two great waves, a tsunami of steel and fire. Gorodov's 21st Army, now renamed 6th Guards, would provide the infantry shock aimed at retaking Tomarovka. To the east was Chiukov's 8th Guards Army, which would bypass Belgorod. That town would then be assaulted by the 5th Guards Army, the only formation still intact and with good combat power from the old 5th Shock Group.

Behind these three strong infantry armies, was Mikhail Katukov's 1st Tank Army, to make the breakthrough and initial exploitation. He would retain his 6th and 31st Tank Corps, but take for himself the newly arriving 5th Guards Mech Corps. For the newly forming 5th Guard Tank Army, he relinquished his 3rd Mech Corps, which would join the 29th Tank Corps. To bring this new army up to strength, STAVKA released the newly rebuilt 17th Tank Corps, now renamed 4th Guards, and it was one of the new structures that would have its motorized infantry regiment converted to the ZIS-42 Halftracks.

Katukov was very eager to get into action and see what 5th Guard Mech Corps could do with the new B.M.P. infantry fighting vehicles. They were the only formation on the field to have that carrier, and this battle would be a good test of its capabilities. Yet 5th Guards Tank Army was still organizing, and so he would wait until June 1st to begin his attack in the north.

While the Russians were planning this new attack, Manstein was busy in the south near Kharkov. He was slowly building up a considerable force capable of stopping the enemy offensive, but he was unaware of the threat looming in the north. The Germans thought they had taken the measure of the foe in that sector. Knobelsdorff's 9th and 6th Panzer Divisions had a rough time against Katukov, but they were able to conduct a fighting retreat in good order. Then he got a call from Manstein again, asking him to detach Balck's 11th Panzer Division.

"What will I hold with here?" Knobelsdorff protested. "Balck's Division is still near full strength. That was my ace in the hole."

"I know, but we gave them a hard blow up there. I do not think they will be able to do anything more on your front for some weeks. We have pulled Salmuth's 10th Korps off the line, and General Kempf will send you the

167th and 168th Divisions in return. Use them to build a second line behind your main front, and then you can rest those two remaining panzer divisions for a few days.”

What Manstein did not reveal was the fact that Salmuth’s Korps had been in action against the Soviet 3rd Shock Group, and both his divisions had been worn down. Manstein knew they would have little offensive capability, but they could still hold on defense. 11th Panzer would make a nice addition to his armored grouping in the south, and he got the much better end of the deal he had brokered with Knobelsdorff.

Now things were looking a little better for him. The Soviet penetrations over the Donets had at least been contained. That said, the German “Donets Line,” as Hitler was now calling it, was only that in name. They only held a 30-kilometer segment of the upper Donets, from Belgorod south. The Russians were over the river to a depth of 10 to 15 kilometers from Volchansk all the way south to Chuguyev, which they had just taken. Now Manstein had to see if he could push them back while still holding on to Kharkov, and finding a way to reinforce the Donets Bend from Zimyeve down through Andreyevka to Izyum.

The General drafted a terse message to OKW, covering his intentions with the thin veneer of a document in writing. It read: “*Under the condition that Kharkov will be held at all costs, as Armeegruppe Commander, I am assuming freedom to operate in a manner best designed to defeat the enemy and throw him back.*”

Hitler read it in silence when Zeitzler handed it to him. He watched the map updates with growing concern and an inner simmering anxiety. On the morning of May 31st, the Red Tide had again reached the village of Borovoye south of Kharkov. And there was fighting at Rodin on the main road from Chuguyev. They had reclaimed all the ground they had been driven from during Manstein’s dramatic counteroffensive in April. He could feel, and clearly see on that map, that something had changed in the war on the *Ostfront*. What the Soviets took, they more often than not held. What they lost, they now came to reclaim, and once again, they had their eyes fixed on Kharkov.

They were trying to envelop the city from the southwest, with a report coming in from Aleksandrovka, about 25 kilometers from the city, that a strong Soviet tank corps was now attacking in force. It was later identified as Kuznetsov’s 1st Guard Tank Corps, the most powerful in the army, and

defending at Aleksandrovka, the Germans had posted Feld Ersatz Battalion-A, a ragtag band of walking wounded that acted as a replacement unit. It was the best the Soviets had against the worst the Germans could offer, and the result was a foregone conclusion.

Right behind the heavy tanks and Guardsmen of Kuznetsov's spearhead, he had sent the 10th Tank Corps in support, so this was a very strong left hook. Yet lurking in the heart of the city, the Germans had troops of higher caliber, the *Grossdeutschland* Division, coiled like a steel spring and ready to strike out in any direction. Manstein ordered Hörnlein to reassemble the entire division there, with most of the heavy Ferdinands attached. He then sent KG Deckard south to shore up the flank of Sepp Dietrich's 1st SS.

That division was now heavily engaged all along its extended front, and facing both 1st and 2nd Guards Mech Divisions. The battle for Kharkov was going to be like a clash of Titans, the hardened gladiators from either side hammering at one another all along the tight defensive perimeter that extended some 15 kilometers out from the city.

In addition to that Ace he had in hand, General Manstein still had two more cards to play. He had another high face card with the arrival of the *Wiking* Division from Dnipropetrovsk where it had been taking on equipment. The fighting at Alexandrovka had cut the rail line to the city, so it would be approaching the battle from the south, on Kuznetsov's left and rear flank if he advanced on Kharkov. That was a division that would be certain to force the dogged Russian General to look over his shoulder.

The other card was a good high numbered spade, the 36th Infantry Division, which was the old 36th Motorized after converting to a leg infantry division. It would come by rail from Armeegruppe Center, and deploy just west of Kharkov to screen that flank. So Steiner's entire Korps, five divisions including *Grossdeutschland*, was now assembled near the city, and it would be facing off against the equivalent of four Soviet armies.

Eicke's 3rd SS was coming down from the north, but was diverted towards the bridgehead achieved by 7th Guards near Murom. The enemy was coming through the lines of 111th Infantry with a lot of tanks and SU's, so the bulk of 3rd SS went into action there to stop them. They went about it with methodical efficiency, the infantry deploying from halftracks in the woods on the northern flank of their attack. They waited for the panzers to come up, and then advanced behind them in close support, crouching low.

The tank battle in the woodland was a wild affair, with tree limbs being

shattered, other's being hewn down by the high velocity rounds. A fire started, and heavy smoke rolled through the forest as the Tiger company ground its way forward. When there was not room to advance between trees, the heavy tanks simply bull-dozed them down and then rolled over the fallen trunks. The Soviets had a number of heavy SU-122's, and soon the duel looked like herds of war elephants battling in the forest.

The Germans called a halt, seeing that the Russians had backed off several hundred yards to try and regroup. Then came the rumble of distant guns and the whooshing sound of a rounds falling. The entire division artillery pool, all four battalions, had unleashed a barrage called in by the leading SS troops. It fell like blistering death. Many of the rounds bursting in the air to shred and flay the tree limbs and send a hail of shrapnel and splinters in all directions. There wasn't much Soviet infantry in the attack, but they would have been cut to pieces if they had been under that ironfall. An SU-122 was struck by a very near miss, the explosion enough to blow the heavy 30-ton vehicle onto its side.

Basically an armored howitzer, the SU-122 was not a match for the German tanks on its own. It was an infantry fire support weapon, but the Soviets had deployed these in mixed regiments, with platoons of SU-76 tank destroyers. Even that was not going to help, as the SU-76 only had 33mm of frontal armor, and the "Sukas," or "little bitches" as the Russians called them, simply could not stand against the better armored Pz-IVF2's the SS were driving, which had 50mm armor. The Russians were, quite literally, getting 'bitch slapped.' They began to fall back under that artillery barrage and were soon pushed out of the woodland into open fields beyond.

The Soviet heavy howitzers could kill a German tank if they could hit one with a HEAT round, but knowing this, the German tanker simply engaged at longer range. Though the SU-122 looked like a formidable armored beast, it actually had only 45mm of frontal armor, less than the German Pz-IV's. The German tankers pulled up to the edge of the trees, and started blasting away. It was the very definition of the phrase "target rich environment," and brought the attack by 7th Guards Army to a complete halt.

The arrival of 3rd SS, and 11th Panzer from the north had therefore done much to shore up the lines and contain the pressure from 7th Guards and 69th Army. To the south of that battle, Hausser's 2nd SS was slugging it out with the 3rd Guards Army, which was strong enough to take on that division, and both of the *Reichsführer* SS Brigades at the same time, and still make

headway.

Hausser's main attack was solid, but on his southern flank, the Russians found a weaker sector held only by two companies of the recon battalion, and a pioneer company. That battalion sized KG was then hit by the whole of the 40th Guard Rifle Division, and it could not stop them. This forced Hausser to detach units from his stronger sector, and try to close that breach.

Yet it was the weary *Reichsführer* Brigades that were having the most difficulty. Many of their battalions were weakened by the five days of near non-stop fighting, and the Soviets found a hole between their southern flank and the lines of the Nordland SS Division. It wasn't a serious breakthrough yet, but two brigades of Soviet cavalry had raced through, and they were causing havoc with the Werfer battalions attached to the *Reichsführer* Brigades in the rear.

Then Sepp Dietrich called Manstein to report on the deteriorating situation on his own front. "I'm fighting two Mech Corps and a Tank Corps just came up on my western flank. This is no good. We can't hold them much longer."

"Deckard's KG wasn't enough?"

"That helped, but he reports that another strong armored formation is flanking him to the west as well."

"Alright, 36th Infantry has just arrived on the rail line south of the city," said Manstein. "I'm moving it to support your flank. If you can hold out until tomorrow morning, I think we'll have a nice little surprise for General Kuznetsov. Gille is back with his *Wiking* Division, and they are coming up from the south."

"The prodigal son," said Dietrich. "That is good news. "Alright, I'll stand my ground. But you'd better look after that *Nordland* outfit. They are fighting hard, but there's a lot of pressure on them too."

"I'll have Hornlein put together a KG."

Manstein's surprise came up on the train from the Dnieper, reaching Novaya Vodolaga, about 45 kilometers southwest of Kharkov. There the first train found a small blocking force, the recon battalion of 1st Tank Corps that had been sent to scout that sector and look for just this sort of arrival by the enemy. That would give the Russians something to think about. Then Manstein got on the radio to find Balck, learning that his 11th Panzer Division had just formed up behind 3rd Panzergrenadiers.

"I want you to roll south and relieve 2nd SS on the line. I need Hausser

elsewhere.”

“Very well,” said Balck. “But I could punch right through the Russian line and go all the way to the Donets.”

“Yes, but another time. Stop 3rd Guards Army for me, and I will use *Das Reich* further south. We have a small breakthrough to contend with there.”

“I’ll move immediately.”

That was going to improve the situation on the road to Kharkov considerably. Balck found a battalion of heavy SU-152’s, and his tankers quickly chopped them to pieces, knocking out eight of twelve in ten minutes. The KG from *Grossdeutschland* ran into the enemy cavalry that had broken through, and put them to rout. There were several holes in the lines of the *Nordland* SS, but Manstein was confident that their brethren in *Das Reich* would soon arrive to stabilize the situation, allowing him to recall the Grenadier regiment to his nest in Kharkov. *Grossdeutschland* Division was his last reserve, and he wanted it as fresh as possible.

He was going to need it.

Far to the north, things were about to gear up another level. Mikhail Katukov had decided to send in Rodmistrov’s rebuilt 5th Guards Tank with two of its three Corps to test the enemy line west of Tomarovka. It was but a prelude to the main attack, which he had scheduled for that night, a midnight surge of two Guards armies and five tank corps against the lines of 42nd Korps, holding from Belgorod west through Tomarovka and on to Model’s right flank.

The second Phase of Operation Rumyantsev was about to begin.

Chapter 17

While this action was being fought, word came from Knobelsdorff in the north to report that the Russians were renewing their attack. There was growing pressure all along the line, mostly by the rifle divisions of 6th and 8th Guards, the former being the troops of 21st Army which had just been awarded Guards status for their defense against *Zitadelle*. Yet 15 kilometers northwest of Tomarovka, a strong group of mechanized infantry had swarmed through the lines of 39th Division.

Identified as 3rd Mech, the Germans thought they were being hit by the same nemesis that had stopped their attack the previous week, and reported that 1st Tank Army was attacking their sector. They were not aware that the Russians had shuffled their cards, and this was instead the new 5th Guards Tank Army under Rodmistrov. Knobelsdorff had no choice but to commit Scheller's 9th Panzer to stop them, even though that division needed rest and refit after the grueling drive towards Kursk.

3rd Battalion of 677 Grenadiers was already surrounded and bypassed by the fast-moving halftracks, and Scheller threw the bulk of his division in to remedy the situation. The Germans drove back the troops of 1st Mech Regiment, but there was another right behind it, this time supported by the 12th Guard Tank Brigade.

A lot of the German infantry had dug into hedgehog positions, a strategy they often used against Russian offensives. It was dangerous if they were hit by too much force, for the Soviet infantry would flow around the strongpoints like French cavalry breaking on British squares. Yet in such events, it was the only way for that infantry to survive, even if it might soon find itself behind the advancing tide of the enemy attack. The men of the 39th were glad that 9th Panzer was a hand, but Scheller's troops were now in a very difficult fight. It was not only 3rd Mech that had been sent in. The 4th Guards Tank Corps had also been added to that attack, and now Rodmistrov sought to get revenge for the death of 23rd and 24th Tank Corps, and the loss of the former 5th Tank Army Commander himself, General Rybalko.

Some 20 kilometers to the east, between Tomarovka and Belgorod, the infantry of Chiukov's 8th Guards was hitting the German front manned by the 161st Division. Knobelsdorff had posted 6th Panzer behind that segment

of the line, and it was also needing refit after *Zitadelle* . The initial German reaction was to move up local reserves and answer the enemy push with artillery. Thus far there had been no sign of enemy attacks, and Knobelsdorff was still laboring under the assumption that Katukov was hitting his left.... But he was wrong.

Behind Chiukov's lines, Katukov had formed up his revitalized 1st Tank Army. 6th and 31st Tank Corps were forward, backed by the new 5th Guard Mech that he had stolen away from Rodmistrov's army in exchange for his old 3rd Mech. He was forward with that unit, walking down the columns as they formed up, his hand running over the sleek, smooth sides of his brainchild, the new Soviet B.M.P. The three brigade columns extended many kilometers to the rear, the engines only now thrumming up and the SMG laden infantry mounted through the rear hatches. Katukov peered inside the lead vehicle, giving the men inside a smile.

"Fight hard," he told them, his face now set and serious. "Fight for the Rodina. We stopped them in front of Tula, and by god, we stopped them here as well. Now we throw them out."

The tip of that long deadly metal spear was the three brigades of heavy tanks assigned to this Corps, each fielding 36 of the best tank the Soviets had—the Kirov-I. This division would soon vie with Kuznetsov's 1st Guard Tank as the best in the Army, and it was now poised like an iron bolt about to be catapulted at the German line. The 161st Infantry Division was going to have a very bad night.

Katukov had been encouraged by the news from Rotmistrov to the west. 3rd Mech had led the way, and in spite of intervention by the German 9th Panzer Division, they were breaking through. Now it was time to unleash his new war horses. Just after midnight, he strode up to the head of the column and whistled loudly, circling his finger in the air as a sign for the vehicles to start their engines. One by one, they thrummed to life, like a line of planes on the deck of a carrier readying for takeoff.

Katukov rapped on the hatch of the lead vehicle, and a Lieutenant peered out. "My old 3rd Mech Corps has just broken through to the west. I want you to beat them in the race."

The Lieutenant smiled, and his driver gunned the engine, ready to roll. Katukov looked at his watch, the second hand ticking off to midnight. Then, precisely on schedule, he heard the loud crack of artillery beginning to fire behind him. The distinctive sound of heavy 107 and 120mm mortars joined

them, followed soon after by the roaring howl of the Katyushas.

They had been called that when the troops saw the bold letter “K” painted on the trucks, which was just a marker to indicate they had been produced at the Komintern factory at Voronezh. But they soon began to sing an old favorite song called “Katyusha,” the name of a Russian woman longing for her lost love gone off to the front. It had bolstered the morale of the troops when they heard it, reminding them that they also had lovers and family waiting for them back home, and that so many had already lost their homes to the steel tide of the advancing German Army. Now their rocket launchers would sing another song, one of vengeance, retribution, reprisal.

When the Germans heard it, it had the effect that their own Jericho Horns on the diving *Stukas* once had on their enemies, producing a blood curdling fear. They called them “Kirov’s Organ,” and knew enough to look for any cover they could find when they heard its deep throated roar.

Katukov was coming through.

The plan was a simple one, and it had been dress rehearsed the previous month by Katukov himself. They would break through to either side of Tomarovka, bypass Belgorod, and then run down either side of the Vorskla River. In that first attempt, they had stayed well east of that river, briefly touching base at Borisovka before turning towards the Donets to try and force the withdrawal of 4th Army. Hitler’s stubborn intransigence had kept that army in place, though Heinrici’s backward steps had later resulted in his dismissal to a new post on the “Northern Front,” where Operation Downfall was still being prepared.

This time Katukov had no intention of turning. He knew if he broke through, and ran for Akythrya, the Germans would have to give up their last hold on the upper Donets. Phase one of the plan had already forced the enemy to cancel their *Zitadelle* offensive, and pull all of Steiner’s elite divisions south to defend Kharkov, but Katukov had no intention of making a direct approach to the city either. If he went for Akythrya, the threat would bring strong forces behind the German defense of Kharkov, and they would have to answer that threat. The only force they would have in hand to do that was Steiner, and that would then weaken the defense of Kharkov.

It was envelopment of the city by their mobile elements that the Russians really wanted, while their infantry continued to keep up strong pressure all along the front. Yet Manstein’s surprise in the south was already complicating General Kuznetsov’s envelopment operation. The recon

battalion of 1st Guards Tank reported a long train arriving south of Novaya Vodolaga. The *Wiking* Division was now going to be a big factor on that front.

The “Heroes of Damascus” had returned to the *Ostfront* , and with an assortment of new equipment that no other division had seen. Porsche had been busy designing a whole new line of vehicles that they were trying to ramp up in production. They had already used the 90 chassis of their failed Tiger project to build the formidable “Ferdinand” tank-killing assault gun. Now they opened their barn doors and let out a flock of creatures that were to be found nowhere else on the front.

When the *Wiking* Division returned from Syria, it was needing fresh equipment, with orders to build up to a full panzer division. They would inherit some of the surviving tanks and APCs from the 24th Panzerkorps, but these new additions came directly from Germany on a train from the Porsche and Krupp factories.

Porsche had worked with the Klockner-Humboldt-Deutz Magirus AG firm in Ulm on what was now being called the “Entwicklung” series, or simply the “E-Series” standard AFV project. It had been conceived by Chief Engineer Heinrich Ernst Kniekamp, as a series meant to create improved vehicles to replace the battle tested tanks produced in the early years of the war, including many of the self-propelled guns. The idea was to use standardized parts across the whole line, greatly simplifying production.

There were a few prototypes, and a test batch run of the E-10, a new light tank with a hull mounted gun and very low profile. Its bigger cousin was the E-25, a similar design that had been meant to replace the Pz-IV tanks, and it was later envisioned as a heavy Panzerjager tank, like the “Hetzer.” Perhaps the best of the lot was the E-50, which looked very much like the tank it had been designed to replace, the Panther and Tiger series tanks, but there were only three of these. There were also some Panzerjagers, like the Waffenträger 38D, mounted with a turreted 88mm Pak 43 L/71 gun. It was given 60mm frontal armor, and that gun had real penetrating power at very long ranges.

Other designs existed, like the super heavy jagdpanzer “Krokodil,” on a chassis that would have seen it approach 100 tons in weight when fully loaded. That monster had not yet been born, but the small E-series prototypes and test batches were all released to the *Wiking* s.

Kuznetsov knew he had to cobble together some defense on his left flank. There was very little left in his barn, as all his primary formations had been

committed to the envelopment operation. Aside from that recon battalion he had sent to Novaya Vodolaga, there was a flak unit 8 Kilometers to the northeast, and the 76th heavy SPG Regiment was another six kilometers beyond that on the main road to Kharkov. That had 10 SU-122's, five more heavier SU-152's, and a few armored cars with light infantry. Yet it was the heaviest unit he had in that sector, and he gave it orders to go to the town and reinforce the recon battalion.

The General knew that would not be enough, so he detached the 186th Tank Brigade from 10th Tank Corps to move southwest. Then he ordered his real defense to get ready to move, the Guardsmen of his infantry divisions. These troops had cleared the Donets bend south of Zimyeve, and were now mopping up some Luftwaffe battalions west of that town. He wanted them to continue west and see if they could develop a blocking defense in case anything with real power was coming up that rail line. If he had known about the steel menagerie coming his way, and in the hands of veteran troops like the *Wiking* SS, he would have thought twice about trying to press his envelopment forward.

Events to the east would soon play in his favor. It was the *Nordland* SS Division again, now a month after its baptism of fire, and much worse for the wear. It had learned a great deal in the field since April Fool's Day, but the 3rd Siberian Shock Army was relentless. The lines of Wagner's troops were buckling, with more crisis points than he could manage. The Grenadiers of *Grossdeutschland* had gone to shore up the flagging *Reichsführer* Brigades, and *Nordland* was on its own again.

Manstein was realizing that he would simply have to fall back on Kharkov. The city was a warren of heavy concrete and brick buildings, and he had troops that could turn it into another Volgograd if the enemy wanted a street fight. *Nordland* was in trouble, half the reserve was off trying to shore up the line, Dietrich's *Leibstandarte* was badly overextended, and he knew he had to concentrate to build a stronger defense.

The only segment of the line that was solid was the area being held by *Das Reich* and Balck's 11th Panzer. The former was in a line running parallel to the main road from Stary Saltov to Kharkov, which was screened by a small minor river that flowed into the city. He quickly gave orders that the river line would now become the new main line of resistance, and told Hörnlein to pull back the Grenadiers.

"I want your hounds back in the city," he said. "I am bringing the fight

here. If the *Nordland* SS can get back to this river, all the better, but if they get hung up making the withdrawal, your men should lend a hand. Otherwise, I want them in the city before sunrise.”

“What news from the north?” asked Hörnlein.

“The usual. They are hitting the line between Belgorod and Tomarovka again, and Knobelsdorff’s Korps is missing 11th Panzer. They will get through again, and that will raise the whole question of 4th Army’s position on the upper Donets. Hitler will want to stand fast, but I will not order it. There will be no ‘Festung Belgorod’ this time around, for all that would do is hand the enemy another good division or two to file away with Oppenlander’s 305th that died at Prokhorovka. I foresee having to order all of 42nd Korps to withdraw in a matter of hours.”

“I thought Salmuth’s 10th Korps went north.”

“It did, and it will likely be out of the frying pan and into the fire in another few hours as well. That may buy us another day. I just received notice that 9th Panzer is disintegrating west of Tomarovka. The 6th is holding the line closer to Belgorod, but I think they will bypass that city and put the question to us. I already have given you my answer. I see the 10th Korps as nothing more than a delaying force now. I intend to get our men out of Belgorod, and start peeling back that front from the Donets in short order. As for Model, he’s going to have to fold back as well, and Hitler will have his fits.”

“This could get serious,” said Hörnlein. “You saw what happened to Heinrici.”

“Generals are Generals,” said Manstein. He was a Field Marshal, and perhaps the most highly regarded strategist in the Army. Hitler once listened to him like a school boy before the head master, but that time was long passed. The Führer would quibble with him now, as that marathon session in Zaporozhe had shown the previous month, but Manstein was not going to allow that this time. His loyalty was unquestionable, but he had to do what he knew was right, not for himself, but for the salvation of the Army.

“Papa, let me put it to you this way,” he said to Hörnlein, using the nickname he knew the men often called him. “This front is shielding the Donets Basin—the fabled ‘Donbass’ and the heart of the coal mining center of the Ukraine. That is shielding Rostov, the gateway to the Caucasus, and all of Efendi’s dreams of endless oil. If we lose here—if this front collapses, or is fatally compromised by Hitler’s nonsensical interference, then it all comes

tumbling down—everything. We'll have to pull out of the Caucasus and get Hansen and Kleist back through Rostov, and then order Paulus to fall back behind the Donets where it meets the Don near that city. This little war Hitler wanted with Volkov will be as good as over. Volkov will end up getting exactly what he wanted when he fumed at Ribbentrop. The Kuban will be his once more—until Sergei Kirov comes for it again.”

“I see....” Hörnlein could clearly hear the warning in Manstein’s voice and tone, and knew there would be a good deal of trial and travail ahead for his favored sons, the soldiers of the *Grossdeutschland* Division.

“It is going to be a very long year,” said Manstein. “For the first time, I am beginning to realize that we could lose this war. We broke into this farmhouse, booted out the sleeping farmer and wife, all easily accomplished. But now his sons have learned what we have done, and they are coming home to settle matters. This is not the army we beat from pillar to post in 1941, and I don’t have to remind you that even that army stopped us at Moscow, and then pushed back—very hard.”

Chapter 18

News coming to Manstein's Headquarters was consistently bad. In the North, the enemy had already broken through west of Tomarovka, and powerful new forces were smashing their way through that second line of defense that the two remaining divisions of Salmuth's Korps had thrown up. They had arrived just in time to be hit by the steam rolling offensive, a thankless fate. The men were weary from the long 70-kilometer march, and few battalions had time to get set up or prepare any kind of defensive positions. The enemy tanks were a new model that none of the Germans had seen before, and they watched their 50mm AT gun rounds bounce off that armor on the Kirov tanks.

Manstein drafted the orders that he knew he had to deliver, in spite of what Hitler would think. *To Korps Raus holding the upper Donets and Belgorod*, he signaled. *"Your Korps is to withdraw from Belgorod immediately on the road through Mikoyanovka, and positions on the upper Donets are to be relinquished in good order as this movement proceeds."*

To Dostler's 42nd Korps and Salmuth's 10th: *"You are to fall back in a fighting defensive withdrawal, while continuing to maintain as cohesive a front as possible between the Vorskla River and the Donets. Every effort should be made to maintain contact with Korps Raus on your right. In this movement, Tomarovka is to be deemed non-essential."*

To Knobelsdorff at his headquarters in Borisovka he signaled: *"Your divisions are to render screening and defensive support to the infantry wherever possible, but it will be essential that 6th Panzer be extricated from the line as soon as possible."*

To General Walther Model: *"Given the enemy breakthrough west of Belgorod, it is necessary to readjust your lines so as to maintain contact with our forces on your right. In doing so, Sumy is to be screened and held, but positions on the Psel should be considered disposable at your own discretion. It is imperative that you maintain the integrity of your army in the field, and use every opportunity to frustrate and wear down enemy offensive thrusts in your sector."*

Manstein hoped that note would be interpreted correctly, for Model was a very astute officer, and knew exactly what he needed to do in a situation like

this. At the same time, Manstein had also passed the buck on that order, leaving the final decision up to Model as to whether he would withdraw.

In the south, Manstein had told Hollidt to pull his Korps back to the Donets and seek better defensive ground in the woodland fringing the winding river. 17th Panzer was already holding near the river and screening Balakleya. Reports came that the Russians had again seized Andreyevka, and forced their way over the river to create a small bridgehead. Whether they had any strength behind it was not known.

The only bright spot was the steady advance of the *Wiking* Division, which had leapt from the trains and deployed enough strength forward to quickly clear out Novaya Vodolaga. They continued northeast another eight kilometers before the sun came up on the 1st day of June, eventually meeting the 186th Tank Brigade and engaging it in that grey hour.

That morning, Manstein would cover all these exceptional orders, each one given without consultation with OKW or Hitler, with a long letter to Zeitzler:

“I have, this hour, ordered numerous adjustment to the front now being held by Army Group South in the interest of rebuilding a cohesive defense aimed at halting the current enemy counteroffensive. These orders entail the movement of certain formations, so as to maintain the army’s integrity as a fighting force in the field, and prevent any encirclement of our forces that would become a grave weakening of our general situation and overall strength.

If my intentions as Commander are frustrated by countervailing orders from OKW, or higher authority, I shall have no choice but to assume the Führer has not the necessary confidence in this Headquarters. While no commander in the field should ever be considered infallible, I must point out that this Army Group has carried out each and every assignment given to it with exemplary vigor, and when faced with difficult situations at the end of last year, and against the enemy’s previous attempt to seize Kharkov, we were able to master the situation. The orders I have issued are herewith attached, and are deemed by this Headquarters as essential prerequisites to ensure the defense of Kharkov, and prepare an appropriately timed counterattack.

If the Führer thinks he can find any Army Group Commander or headquarters staff with better nerves than we had in the past six months, with more initiative than we have showed, or with the ability to foresee the

inevitable more clearly than we have done, I am fully prepared to hand over to them. As long as I remain at this post, however, I must have the chance to use my own head.”

It was a stunning and bold communication, covering the withdrawals he had ordered, and basically telling both OKW and Hitler to stay out of his affairs, or find someone else to command Army Group South. He thinly veiled his intention to tender his resignation if his present conduct of the battle was interfered with. [2]

When Zeitzler read the letter, his eyes fixed on one salient comment: “... *so as to maintain the army’s integrity as a fighting force in the field.*” That spoke volumes, the sum of all fears now arising in the minds of the Generals at OKW. The enemy had been able to seize the initiative on the field, and hold it, for the first time in the war. German offensives were now counteroffensives, all aimed at restoring a deteriorating position, and they seldom ended with any full recovery of territory that had been lost to the enemy. Soviet armies appeared on the front at the most inopportune time, and there seemed to be no end to them. All this was also creating a rising level of tension at OKW, for with every backward step the Army took, Hitler would become more and more irrational, more unstable, more demanding, and given to fits of anger and frustration.

As a hedge against Hitler, Manstein would have his staff update OKW on new division positions only after his orders were carried out and the units reported they were on their new assigned frontage. He knew that Hitler found any retreat inimical, unwilling to believe that the German Army could be forced off ground it was determined to hold. The long years of triumph had convinced him that the Wehrmacht was invincible, and he would then blame the loss of ground on the incompetence or weak nerves of his Generals. For him, iron will was the only solution to adversity.

The entire issue of the “adjustments” that Manstein had ordered would, however, be quickly eclipsed by new developments. The Soviets had opened yet another attack, this time aimed at Paulus and his 6th Army in the Don basin. 44th, 28th, 51st, and 2nd Guards Armies smashed through the remnants of Polsten’s 69th Korps, flanking Seydlitz-Kurzbach and compelling him to withdraw towards the Donets. This was Manstein’s greatest fear, a move that now threatened to cut off the entire position in the Caucasus. The rest of 6th Army was strung out to the east, and in danger of being cut off.

It was almost inevitable that there would be repercussions from the bold moves Manstein ordered near Kharkov, but when this news reached OKW, he was not surprised when Hitler announced that he would again fly to the scene for a direct conference, undoubtedly to prevent any further unilateral actions by Manstein. The General, and his Chief of Staff Hans Speidel, steeled themselves for the storm.

“Do you realize the pressure I am under?” said Hitler, unable to let Manstein’s transgressions pass in spite of the urgency of the hour. “When you take such sweeping actions without consultation or consent from higher authority, you compromise positions the Army has taken two long years to obtain! It was only your rank as Commanding officer of this *Armeegruppe* that stopped me from removing you the instant I read this letter!” Hitler threw the long teleprint that Manstein had sent earlier down on the table, his eyes like coal, a pained expression on his face. It was as if he had come to redress a personal insult, an offense directed at him more than what it was meant to be, Manstein’s insistence that he should command his *Armeegruppe*, and not Hitler.

“I overlooked that business with 4th Army earlier,” said Hitler, “but General Heinrici paid the price, did he not? Thank God Model stood his ground, and perhaps I should consider him for higher level command.” Hitler gave Manstein a narrow-eyed look, the implied threat being that he could easily appoint Model in his place. “I need men of iron will, and with backbone in situations like this, not officers who insist that the only solution to every crisis is a withdrawal.”

The General shrugged, then simply pointed at the letter on the table. “That was my warning shot,” he said, quite boldly. “I will not have my nerve, nor my competence in the field, questioned here, not by OKW, and not by you either, my Führer. If Heinrici had obeyed your orders to the letter as you might have wished, he would not be idling on the North Front waiting for Operation Downfall. Instead he would be encircled, along with most of 4th Army, somewhere on the Oskol River, which is now over 100 kilometers behind enemy lines. And without his troops, the center of *Armeegruppe* South would have collapsed. The enemy would already be in Kharkov now, and possibly half way to the Dnieper!”

Now it was Manstein who raised his voice, and Speidel, standing at his side with his hands clasped behind his back, stood frozen like a statue, amazed that his C.O. could address Hitler in that manner. Hitler had his head

turned away, eyes averted, a twitch in his cheek and at the edge of his left eye. Then he turned, the well of his dark eyes so deep that it seemed endless. He regarded the General with an unflinching stare that expressed the full power of his considerable will. It was as if he wished to break Manstein with that stare, crush him, and the silence stretched between the two men like a steel cord pulled to the point of snapping.

Such a moment was often the dreadful calm before the storm, the darkening of the clouds as they towered up and up, building to an outpouring of utter rage. Yet not this time.

Manstein could feel the awful pressure of the Führer's expression, his dissatisfaction, disappointment and more, his disdain. It was an unspoken reprimand carried entirely in the venom of those eyes. Yet behind that stern gaze there was something more, an emptiness, a yearning, an unfed infant in its crib, bawling in the night. The Field Marshall knew that if Hitler spoke next, his words could only lead him one place—into a tirade of blame, recrimination, and anger. Before the Führer could launch himself into that rage, Manstein pressed his offensive, staying objective, cool, unmoved by the emotion of the moment.

He had to impress upon the Führer the real gravity of the situation. He had to see what Manstein himself had finally come to see and believe himself, that somewhere in the long, frozen winter of early 1943, the Soviet army had changed, and dramatically so. The bear that came out of hibernation this year was bigger, meaner, fatter, and yet as hungry as ever.

“We have before us a crisis that makes the matter of Heinrici and 4th Army pale by comparison. Paulus is maneuvering to shore up his line—*maneuvering*—which is how a competent Army commander must fight in situations like this. Yet he has no Panzer divisions assigned to his Army, and his prospects for launching any counterattack aimed at restoring the front are very dim. In fact, there are only three divisions that could be sent—17th Panzer and 29th Motorized in Kirchner's 57th Panzerkorps, and the 18th Panzer Division still in the Caucasus. If Kirchner must go, then I can say with equal certainty, that we will not be able to hold the line of the lower Donets either. The enemy has already seized Andreyevka and Balakleya, and will likely secure the vital crossing at Izyum as well. In this instance, the threat to Paulus will be redoubled, because if we cannot hold here, then his defense further east, no matter how competent and dogged, will be for naught. Now... All that said, I have a solution to the crisis, and yes, it will take iron will to

redress this situation, but not in the manner you may think.”

Whether Hitler followed all that Manstein had said, or truly grasped the military situation he had been trying to explain, could not be known. Yet he heard one word in Manstein’s discourse, the carrot at the end of the stick—*solution*. That was what the Führer wanted, why he had really come all this way to see his Field Marshal. In every crisis, no matter how severe, there had been but one man who had truly prevailed, and that was Manstein. As stubborn as he was, Hitler could feel his own grip on the reins of this war slowly slipping from his grasp, and he wanted to redress that at any cost.

“Solution?” Hitler eyed him with misgiving. “What is it you propose this time?”

“I hesitate to even offer it, as you are so averse to yielding ground to the enemy, but in this instance, I can see no other way. Paulus must restore his front on the line of the Donets. That river will present the enemy with a formidable barrier, and in doing so, his left flank will again be in contact with that of General Hollidt’s forces defending the crossings at Izyum and Krasny Liman.”

“Can this line then be held?”

“Yes. I am certain that we can prevail, but we must act quickly. Since the Italian 8th Army has been withdrawn to Italy, we no longer have to worry about upsetting Mussolini, and I can see no economic or political benefit in holding the Don basin. Paulus presently has the crossing at Belaya Kalivta available, but if he is cut off, then his situation gets very serious. He would have to cross at Tormosin, and this could expose Rostov, as he would have to move his troops south of the Don to then reach that city.”

Hitler studied the map, taking the time to master his own emotions in the situation. “If you can assure me that the Donets line can be held, then I will agree to such a proposal.”

For a moment, Manstein was thrown off balance. He had expected a litany of reasons why the Don basin must be held, and did not think Hitler would acquiesce so easily to this request. He turned to Speidel, giving him a quiet nod of his head, and seeing that he had made somewhat of a breakthrough of his own, he decided to press his luck.

“Excellent,” he said. “It’s clear you appreciate the situation correctly. In that light, I will now ask you to consider our present position in the Caucasus. This move by Paulus will make it prudent to tighten our line this way...” He pointed at the map. The Hungarians are presently here at Kotelnikovo, and I

recommend that they move to Zimovinki. They are not opposed by Soviet troops, as that area south of the Don is Volkov's territory. However, the moves we now make do several things. In addition to consolidating our position, the Soviets will undoubtedly move to occupy the Don basin. When they do so, the river then becomes a border zone between their forces and those of Ivan Volkov, and they will have to garrison that line—the entire line of the Don, from Volgograd to our position.”

“Agreed,” said Hitler. He had, himself, come to see the Don Basin as a liability, and so this minor adjustment was nothing that concerned him. But he perceived there was something more behind Manstein's request, and he soon flushed that bird out of the scrub.

“What about the Caucasus?” he asked directly. “Will our position there remain secure?”

Manstein hesitated briefly, for this was the real heart of the matter. The Donets line screened Rostov, which in turn provided Kleist and Hansen their line of communications back to the heart of Armeegruppe South.

“For the moment,” he said, a warning implicit in that remark.

Part VII

One Small Step

“There is but one step from triumph to fall. I have seen that in the greatest affairs a little thing has always decided great events.”

—Napoleon Bonaparte

Chapter 19

“The Caucasus,” said Manstein. “It is time we had a frank discussion about that. When I received the order to move on Maykop, and against Volkov’s forces, I was very troubled. It seemed to me that we had enough on our hands, and too few allies in this war. Now here we were making an enemy of one of them, and for something that we might have obtained simply with a willingness to negotiate. France joined us, and we ended up having to disarm and occupy them. I fear that the same will happen with Italy soon, and now we are at war with the Orenburg Federation, with a whole new front to hold and defend.”

“There were political considerations you were not aware of,” said Hitler. “Volkov was duplicitous, and to say even that would be too kind. He was devious, scheming to occupy and control all the key oil production centers of the world, and he nearly had them all! Besides, what did we ever gain through this alliance?”

“His Armies were of great help at Volgograd,” said Manstein. “And on the Volga, Sergei Kirov must post many armies to watch that frontier—all troops that he would much rather deploy against us.”

“It was clear that Volkov would never deliver the oil he promised us,” said Hitler. “So he had to be taught a lesson, and learn the consequences of his duplicity.”

“Indeed,” said Manstein with a shrug, “and we must live with them as well. I would ask you to consider our situation in the Caucasus from an economic perspective as well as a military one. It is clear that we cannot proceed to either Baku or Astrakhan, nor is there any reason why we should, now that we have the oil fields at Maykop. The overall strategic situation has dramatically changed in the last few months. The loss of 5th Panzer Army in Tunisia was a very hard blow.”

“Without question,” said Hitler. “Yet that was avoidable. Kesselring gave the enemy far too much there, which is why I am so keen on holding what we have here in the east. Backward steps can become a very bad habit—bad for our morale and good for the enemy.”

“Not in every case,” said Manstein, needing to hold that flank. “Tunisia was a liability. Yes, it kept the British and Americans occupied in the West,

but that position should have been evacuated long ago, while we still had the air and naval power to permit that. As for the Caucasus, we have another situation there that can also become a grave liability. Our troops are now holding terrain over a very broad front, and for no good reason. Hansen and Rouff have sixteen divisions between them. If we were to consolidate to a line closer to Maykop, we could hold that region with an iron wall with no more than eight to ten divisions. Volkov has no offensive capacity. That would free up six to eight divisions, and this would dramatically redress the imbalance in our struggle to hold the middle and upper Donets—one we are clearly losing.”

“I have heard such talk from others,” said Hitler. “A defeatist attitude will never win a race. Look what we have done! We smashed them at Kiev, at Minsk, at Smolensk. We burned Moscow; made rubble of Volgograd! Now I ask the army to take Kursk, one city... *One city!* Suddenly it cannot be done; not with Steiner, not with seven Panzer divisions that were committed to that attack.”

“What does this tell you?” said Manstein. “The Army has fought hard. We have better tanks and equipment than we ever had before. There is no question as to the valor and dedication of the troops, yet now he can push us. He had enough to fight us in the north and still launch this heavy attack towards Kharkov again. It took all we had to stop those Winter offensives in the Don Basin last year. What does this tell you? Our enemy has changed. He has taken every blow we have delivered, suffered enormous losses, and yet there he stands. We crushed what was left of his old army in the Kuban, and it was but a shell of the force he first sent there. Now we face an all new army, and for the first time, they have tasted victory. They will want more.”

Manstein needed to find some way to make the situation clear. “We destroyed most of their 5th Shock Army, and two Tank Corps during Operation *Zitadelle* . Yet still they come, and as strong as ever. They have replaced all their losses, seemingly overnight, which can only mean one thing. The Soviets were not idling behind their fortified lines all winter. We are seeing new tanks and vehicles, new mechanized corps, entire new armies being transferred to this front. It is clear that the enemy has decided to focus all his energies against the southern wing of our forces. It is the one place they can attack that can yield striking gains.

“Do you realize that an advance now of little more than 100 kilometers takes them to the Dnieper? That should be a sobering thought, and here I am

trying to scrape up infantry divisions to cover the Middle Donets. Do you see that gap in the lines on the situation map? There is nothing to stop them from going for the Dnieper this very moment. It is only their caution after the blow we delivered last month that gives them pause, but I have little doubt that even as we speak, they are moving up fresh reserves to exploit that opening.

“In the meantime, Steiner’s divisions move from one crisis point to another. His equipment might be new, but there were not enough infantry replacements, and those that did arrive were green. I had Sepp Dietrich holding a frontage of 30 kilometers at one point, and he was opposed by the entire 1st Guards Army! The Panzergrenadiers are wearing down. Some battalions are only 60% of normal strength. And now, since I have had to concentrate everything here in the south to protect Kharkov, that left Knobelsdorff with only two Panzer divisions. The enemy is attacking up there with five armies, which include six mobile corps. There was simply no way that line will hold without redeploying to the south to straighten out the front.

Hitler shook his head, frustrated. “More ground lost, when we should be half way to Kursk by now. We have *given* Sergei Kirov everything he has gained. If my Generals would fight as hard as our troops, he could not take a single acre from us! Now you suggest we withdraw to Maykop? What about Groznyy? We shed good German blood taking that from Volkov. You would simply hand it back to him?” Hitler seemed aghast.

“Not at all,” said Manstein. “There will be nothing to give, for we would utterly destroy it. In fact, we should do the very same thing at Baba Gurgur—burn it. Destroy everything, and by so doing we deny it to the enemy. I have already made it painfully clear that we will gain absolutely no economic benefit from those oil fields. We cannot transport it to Germany. In the case of Groznyy, it will take a pipeline from there to Rostov, because we do not control Georgia, nor will we have the forces necessary to do so. That is 700 kilometers, and it will take us six months or longer before it could be functional. However, a pipeline from Maykop to Rostov already exists. It is only in need of repair. And if necessary, we could also build such a line from Maykop to Taman, and then simply move the oil over the Black Sea. For that matter, building the line south to Tuapse would be even easier. That is a distance of just a little over 100 kilometers, over some mountainous terrain, but it could be constructed in a few months. Some of that line already exists as well.”

Hitler nodded, seeing the situation in the cold light of reality now. He had wanted Baku, and Astrakhan, but even he could see that he would never get them. He had wanted to deny them to Volkov, even if he could not take that oil for himself, and this was what Manstein was now proposing.

“Then this entire move into the Caucasus was a great waste,” said Hitler.

“Quite the contrary,” said Manstein. “Yes, we might have negotiated for Maykop. That all went badly, but given that we are now at war with Volkov, the drive south to Groznyy was a severe blow to his little empire. We have shown him that we can push him any time we choose. Now we can utterly destroy his facilities at Groznyy, tear up his infrastructure so badly that he can make no use of the oil he covets there. We already have what we came for—useable oil, and fields within reach of ports that can get it to Germany. I strongly suggest we focus all our efforts on the Maykop-Tuapse pipeline. Now that Raeder has destroyed the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, we are masters of those sea-lanes. The oil can be shipped directly to Constanta on the Romanian coast, and then all the oil cars from Ploesti will be waiting to take it there for refinement and shipping to the Reich.”

Hitler was silent for some time, thinking, looking over the map. Everything Manstein said made perfect sense. He would not get Baku, and Astrakhan, and it was true that the oil fields of Groznyy were simply too far away to be of any benefit within the next year. The same could be said for Baba Gurgur, for that oil would have to move by rail over 1700 kilometers, through Turkey to Istanbul, and the rail capacity could not feed Guderian’s divisions while it also moved oil in any quantity that could matter.

It was abysmally clear to him now that all his adventures, in Syria, in Iraq and the Caucasus, had been as expensive as they were successful. He seized vast amounts of terrain, but most of it was absolutely useless, and much of it relied on the tentative agreements he had forged with Turkey. Manstein hit this front directly with his next statement.

“My Führer... Rommel gave you Damascus, and Guderian gave you Baghdad. What good has that done for us? We will not get to Cairo through Damascus, and Guderian will not get to Basrah any more than I will get to Astrakhan. These should no longer be considered strategic objectives. In fact, any further plans aimed at securing them would be foolhardy.”

Hitler wanted to shift the blame. “Need I remind you that it was you who first proposed such a movement through Turkey. I devised Plan Orient on your recommendation.”

“True, but that was in 1941. The movement into Syria was halfhearted, and meant only to support the Vichy French. Your recent offensives were bold and daring, but they simply came too late. If we had done this in 1941, things would be different. Now however, the occupation of Syria and Iraq is as much a liability as Tunisia was, and it could end the same way. Operation *Phoenix*, if continued, will become an Albatross. We need divisions for Italy and Southern France now. Where will we get them? Consider what I have said. Destroy Groznyy and Baba Gurgur, and then bring those troops here. Consolidate around Maykop and free up another eight to ten divisions there. The Western Allies are a minor threat at the moment. If you move all of Kubler’s divisions to Italy, we will have very good prospects there, and with Guderian’s forces back in the fold here, we can deal with the real threat—the Soviets. Then you will actually have the troops needed to launch Operation Downfall.”

Hitler took a deep breath. “I have considered this for some months now. The Spring campaign was a great success, but the summer in Iraq is merciless. I have already recalled the *Wiking* Division, and the Brandenburgers. In time, I can see that I will have to pull out all those Panzer divisions I sent Rommel and Guderian as well. I may be stubborn, Herr General, but I am not blind, nor am I stupid as your tone with me would sometimes assume. I have already told Zeitzler to begin planning the movement of the better divisions from our Middle East adventures. As for what you suggest in destroying the key oil fields we have seized, I have every intention of doing so. It is a pity that Guderian did not push harder to get to Basra and Abadan. Then I could have the pleasure of destroying those fields as well. If I cannot keep and use what I have taken, then no one else will make use of that oil either—not for years.”

“Precisely,” said Manstein. “Then what about my suggestion that we consolidate in the Caucasus?”

“I will give it further consideration, and take up the matter with OKW. I have made that headquarters responsible for all matters on the *Ostfront* now. OKH is a nuisance. We will have one central headquarters to manage all the affairs of the army, OKW.”

“And perhaps it would also be wise to appoint a senior officer to take full charge of the *Ostfront*,” said Manstein. “Decisions would, of course, require your final approval, but it would relieve the burden you now carry.”

“General Manstein... I came here with the possible intention of removing

you from command, but I have mastered that impulse. Do not stand there now and suggest that *I* be removed from command. Without my constant vigilance, this Army would become a shamble.”

Silence.

“Very well,” Manstein said with an air of finality. “Is it your wish that I relinquish this command? I am perfectly willing to hand over to anyone you propose. For that matter, I am willing to countermand any of the orders I have recently relayed to OKW, though I tell you, and with no uncertainty, that to do so would invite disaster.”

“No, General, I think I will keep you right where you are. But you must not be rash! I need your loyalty, as much as I need the good advice I have always sought from you. Now then.... As to the matter at hand. What will it take to stop these Soviet offensives? You did so a month ago, even if we did not recover all the ground they took from us.”

Manstein pointed to the map. “At the moment, our situation on the Middle Donets is quite precarious. That gap I pointed out is over 35 miles wide. That was where I sent the *Wiking* Division, but it cannot hope to defend such a frontage, nor can it be used to counterattack under the present circumstances. I have Steiner well concentrated to hold Kharkov, and I can assure you that the city will not fall—unless the front to the northwest should collapse. Then Kharkov would be in grave danger of encirclement. I need more infantry. Armeegruppe Center must provide it, and failing that, I have already suggested where it can be found.”

“Very well,” said Hitler. “I will get you every division I can, and then you must put a stop to these spoiling attacks. Downfall simply cannot proceed until this matter is cleaned up. I will consider what you have asked concerning the Caucasus, but I caution you not to make any further withdrawals without direct approval from OKW. If, however, you can find a way to maintain our current position there while extracting a few divisions for use on the lower Donets, then I give you my permission to make these transfers. But advise OKW *before* you do so, not after. Do not think you can present me with a *fait accompli* and do whatever you wish. There is a limit to my forbearance. Your plan delivered France in 1940. You took the Crimea, the Donbass, the Don basin, and Volgograd. I have had every faith in your ability in the past, and I will continue to rely on you, especially in times of crisis.”

“I am gratified to hear that,” said Manstein. “Yet realize that all I have

done, in every situation, was for the preservation of the Army I command. 4th Army would be dead now if I had not acted earlier. 5th Panzerarmee is already dead, and now 6th Army is dying. Let me save it. May I order Paulus to move as I have requested?"

"You may do so, as long as you hold the line of the lower Donets, and Rostov as well. I will get you the troops you need, and then I expect you to use them. Push the enemy back, General Manstein. It is not enough to simply stop them. You must push them back—crush them, and show them the futility of these offensives. Then we can return to plans for our own summer offensive in earnest. It was abundantly clear that *Zitadelle* was hastily mounted, premature, and ill-conceived."

"I argued against it," said Manstein. "It had no hope of succeeding without a strong pincer on the northern segment."

"Indeed," said Hitler. "That is now quite apparent, and I will also admit to you that had we heeded your advice and dealt with this concentration of enemy forces in the south first, then we might not be having this discussion here today. So now we correct that situation. I want you to use this opportunity to destroy these armies reaching for Kharkov. I have restored Steiner's Korps to full power. Use it!"

Chapter 20

One other thing was ‘abundantly clear’ to Manstein after this exchange. In spite of every effort to clarify the situation the Army now faced, Hitler did not grasp what he had tried to convey. There he was talking of the enemy offensives as if they were mere spoiling attacks, a nuisance that interfered with his plans for further summer offensives that had not even been discussed. It was one thing to make such grandiose and sweeping statements, but quite another to see them carried through on the field of battle.

A feeling of quiet despair settled on the Field Marshal, for he knew that he would soon be placed in situations that would force him to make very difficult choices and decisions. He might have to choose between saving the army, the real army in the field, or preserving Hitler’s fanciful notion of that army by loyally acceding to his commands. Would it take a disaster greater than the loss of 5th Panzer Army to shake some sense into the Führer?

For his part, Hitler had been unwilling to take Manstein’s head, and he had pardoned his transgressions with an uncharacteristic willingness to compromise. This was born of the fact that he had come to many of the same conclusions concerning his foray into Syria and Iraq. It had seemed such a clear and vital plan at the outset, and the stunning success of Guderian’s Operation *Phoenix* was thrilling. Yet for what? The reality was that all the economic objectives were fruitless. Only the Maykop operation had delivered anything that could be used. In that, the Führer knew in his bones that his Field Marshal was correct.

Something in him took solace in the suggestion that the fields at Grozny and Baba Gurgur be completely destroyed. He gave the order to Guderian to do that in his theater, and then to transfer both 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions to the general reserve on the *Ostfront*. He would also pull 2nd and 16th Panzers out of Syria, and begin to move Kubler’s Mountain troops to Italy. Plan Orient, rising from its ashes as Operation *Phoenix*, would now come to an end, for even Hitler could also perceive the growing threat in the east, and the grave danger the revitalized Soviet Army now represented.

That was where the war would be won or lost, and the Führer knew it as a man knows impending death when it stalks him. Yes, now he would war on death itself.

In spite of this awareness growing in the darkness of his mind, there was still a certain sloth in the way he would give consideration to requests made by his Generals. He remained stingy with his permission to make withdrawals, and while he made many promises, procrastination would become his weakness now. Hitler would consider all that Manstein had told him, but he would take his time.

In the short run, he would take one infantry division from Armeegruppe Center, the 7th, and allow Manstein to transfer two divisions from Hansen's Army in the Caucasus, the 24th and 68th, which were formed into 44th Korps under General Maximilian de Angelis. That would still leave seven Line Infantry, four Light Infantry and two Security Divisions in the Caucasus, along with the 18th Panzer Division. While Hitler would give orders to shift all Oil Brigades to Maykop and the pipeline project effort to Tuapse, he did not yet order the destruction of the Grozny fields, nor any withdrawal to consolidate the front closer to Maykop.

Volkov had to be left to stew for a while longer. Hitler wanted him to think that the cessation of operations there was merely a pause while the Army dealt with the Soviets. As for Operation *Untergang*, it was only mentioned in passing during the conference. Hitler continued to tie up much needed troops there, as the Russians stolidly dug in to await any attack that might come their way. The Führer continued to believe that *Zitadelle* was simply a cake that had been pulled out of the oven too soon, and inwardly blamed Manstein for cancelling it without his permission, though he never voiced that to the Field Marshal directly.

As for Manstein himself, Hitler began to feel that he was as much of a problem for him as an asset. The Field Marshal had just enough capital in the bank to preserve his post and allow his decisions to stand, but the Führer was quietly eying General Model as a possible replacement, again something he kept to himself. He would wait and see what developed around Kharkov. Perhaps the old miracle worker would prevail yet again.

And perhaps not.... There was a good deal that men like Mikhail Katukov, Vasily Kuznetsov, Rokossovsky, Vatutin, Konev and others would have to say about the matter, for words and promises do not stop the cold steel of enemy tanks, and procrastination in the face of a determined enemy was never wise.

* * *

The telephone rang at Manstein's headquarters in Kharkov, and Speidel answered. It was General Model, and he had some very welcome news.

"The Führer has approved a transfer of two divisions to your sector," he began. "So I have ordered General Siebert to take his 5th Korps to a position forward of Akythrya. If nothing else, you can know that you will have something in reserve."

"That is very good news," said Speidel. "Please tell me these are not hand me downs."

"The Corps is composed of the 102nd and 294th. Both saw action last month, but they have been rested."

"Any new infantry matters a great deal," said Speidel. "The units on the front are wearing very thin, at least at the point of the enemy attack. I will see that the Field Marshal is informed immediately. His conference with the Führer has ended."

"I hope it went well," said Model. "Kluge tells me that there may be more coming from 9th Army. Whatever was discussed, it seems to have broken the logjam where Hitler's use of reserve divisions is concerned. These were all troops he had insisted we hold for an offensive aimed at Orel. Needless to say, that is not in the works."

"What is coming from 9th Army?"

"One division, the 82nd, and another Kampfgruppe. I'm afraid that may be all we can send. Tell Manstein that I have redeployed my right wing as he requested. If necessary, I can pivot that front towards Akythrya. That has to be where they are headed now. They want to envelop Kharkov."

"Things are difficult," said Speidel. "They are on the outskirts of the city as we speak. Every time I look at the map, all I can see is one massive pocket forming. If that northern pincer gets out of control, and moves due south, we could be in the stew. Hitler will see these division transfers as blood money, and he will not want us to withdraw."

"My infantry should help," said Model, understanding all too well what Speidel was saying.

"They will, but your Army had only eight divisions if I recall. This doesn't leave you with very much."

"It is not my Army any longer," said Model. "Hitler has given me the 9th Army, the largest in Armeegruppe Center. Weichs is taking over 2nd Army. Unfortunately, a good many of the divisions assigned to my roster are

somewhere else. You already have my 7th and 82nd Infantry Divisions and 9th Panzer. My 18th Panzer is in the Caucasus, the 78th Sturm is still in Iraq, 2nd Panzer is in Syria, though I'm told it will be returning soon. So the 44th Panzerkorps is now reduced to two infantry divisions. What a misnomer!"

"Don't complain," said Speidel. "It is the same everywhere, and I think it will only get worse. The Soviets are already over the Middle Donets at Andreyevka again. Manstein has ordered Kirchner to pull both his divisions off the line and move to that sector. Hopefully, we can discourage them if they have any notion to exploit the gap there."

"A difficult situation," said Model. "Very well, give my regards to the Field Marshal."

* * *

So, Model is feeding a little higher on the Lamb, thought Manstein. 9th Army once had 26 divisions, the heart of Armeegruppe Center. It had held the line west of Orel, covering Bryansk, and fought well. Model will only make it better.

As for Hitler, I think both Speidel and I were shocked that things went as well as they did. His remarks at the end were quite telling. Even though his frustration would lead him here to remove me from command, he could not do so, because I think, deep down, he knows that he could not master this situation. The tension between my loyalty to him as Germany's leader, and my deference to his command, is always in play against my duty to the army, and military common sense.

In his mind, Hitler is still fighting the last war. These battle lines are merely trench lines to him. He would just have our troops sit there behind wire and machineguns, but he has forgotten what happened when the tanks came on the scene. If one position is overrun and taken by the enemy, he thinks only of mounting a charge to retake that trench.

At least Hitler kept his promises. Thus far he has not rescinded my orders to consolidate the front. He is getting me some infantry, and I will soon have two more infantry divisions from Hansen to help shore up the Middle Donets. I have tightened up my line near Kharkov, and the enemy has tightened his noose. What I would like to do now is counterpunch off the ropes. I think I can recall 3rd SS to the city now, and *Grossdeutschland* Division is ready to fight. What I would like to do is strike Kuznetsov with those two divisions,

right through the lines of Sepp Dietrich's 1st SS. My only concern is the north, so I have ordered Balck to take 11th Panzer back to Knobelsdorff as a fire brigade.

As to the situation near Andreyevka, Kirchner has his troops in position now, and he will deliver a counterblow in conjunction with my attack out of Kharkov. So, it is time for the knights to sally forth out of the castle. The attack begins at dusk, a nice night action that will hopefully catch the enemy napping.

But that was not to be.

Kuznetsov had plans of his own. He had spoken with Leylushenko of the 3rd Guards Army, and Galitskiy of 3rd Shock. That group was on his right, and he wanted both armies to begin a big push to break through to the city that very same night, while he organized his own attack. The two sides would soon be like a pair of bull rams, butting their steel antlers against one another in a battle that could decide the fate of the city.

Just as Kirchner was forming up south of Andreyevka, the Soviets were also busy reinforcing their bridgehead. Inheriting the trucks once used by the Soviets when they converted more units to mech infantry, the two Siberian Armies (1st and 2nd Shock), had been reinforced by a pair of nine battalion Motor Rifle Corps. The 1st Siberian Motor Rifle Corps had established the bridgehead, and now it was being reinforced by the division from 2nd Shock Army, detached for this purpose.

They were just the leading edge of forces Zhukov now planned to move south of the Donets. Behind them was the entire 27th Steppe Army from Vatutin's front with six more rifle divisions. Further north, the *Wiking* Division had been forced to halt its advance towards Kharkov by the appearance of strong infantry forces on its right. Those were the Guards Rifle Divisions, six in all, that made up Kuznetsov's infantry support, and they would not be alone.

3rd Guards Tank Corps, a unit meant for Leylushenko, had been detached to provide more armor in that sector, and now Zhukov was doubling down by committing the entire 4th Guards Army, six more Guards Rifle Divisions organized into two Corps. This was the old 24th Army, pulled off the line and reorganized with fresh recruits filling out the veteran divisions, and a new name. It was just as Manstein had explained it to Hitler. The enemy was attacking with new Armies that had never been heard of before.

That night Kirchner opened his attack in the south with 17th Panzer, 29th

Motorized and the 501st *Schwerepanzer* battalion. It caught the 2nd Siberian Motor Rifle Corps by surprise, as half of that division was further west assisting the attack being made by their brothers in 1st Siberian. Kirchner was going to be attacking into the flank of that operation, and he hoped he could stop it completely.

It was but one small part of the great flow of troops and equipment over the Middle Donets. The 1st Guards Cavalry Corps had come over the river using a small bridge at Bishkin, and they were moving in three divisions through the thick woodland south of Zimyev. Above those same woods, 4th Guards army was marching in behind the slowly expanding perimeter of the 1st Guards Army, which had pushed through Taranovka southwest of Kharkov. They eventually found the right flank of the *Wiking* Division, which had stopped Kuznetsov's 10th Tank Corps. Active reconnaissance soon discovered that there was nothing beyond that flank, and so the Guards infantry began to maneuver to enfilade the *Wiking* s. When 7th Tank Corps began to probe the left flank of Gille's division, he realized that he was going to have to withdraw.

This was not Damascus....

Near Kharkov, both sides met like two lines of armored cavalry, with fighting more intense than the night of the *Zitadelle* offensive. *Grossdeutschland* Division sallied forth, recapturing the village of Oshovka, only to find the Russians reorganizing for an immediate counterattack. 51st Panther Battalion surged into the enemy line, and ran right into the oncoming attack by 17th Heavy Tank Brigade. That action would pit a massed formation of 72 new Panthers against 24 Kirov-I heavy tanks, 18 KV-II's, 11 T-34/85's and 12 T-34/76 medium tanks. With 12 more assault guns on the Soviet side, the numbers were just about equal.

It was a stunning duel, the thunder of the guns and growl of the tanks ripping the night apart. The one advantage the soviets had was a preponderance of infantry support when two battalions of 1st Guard Mech joined the action.

The battle rippled all along the line extending to the northeast, lighting up the night with fire. 3rd SS gained a kilometer only to find itself under attack by two fresh Siberian divisions from 3rd Shock Army. 2nd *Reichsführer* Brigade smashed through one rifle division only to find itself in a life and death struggle with the newly arriving 3rd Guards Mech Division.

Yet the most dramatic event that night was the relentless advance of

Mikhail Katukov's new 5th Guards Mech Corps in the north. It struck the German 167th Infantry Division, smashing one battalion after another. The Germans stared in awe at the new fast moving infantry carrier, which they first thought was a new light tank, until swarms of infantry suddenly emerged from the shadows, submachineguns blazing. The Russians went right through the German line, the fast moving BMPs sweeping south and west towards Grayvorn.

6th Panzer rushed to the aid of the 167th, grinding through the town of Trosnoye to engage the enemy recon battalion. Behind the front, Hermann Balck was listening to the radio traffic, his curiosity up with many reports of a "new" Russian infantry carrier that was wreaking havoc as it came through the lines. He found the nearest radio, and called his 'Incomparable Hauser.'

"I'm hearing a lot about a new Russian AFV in the mech battalions. Find me one. I want to have a close look at it."

What the General ordered, Hauser would deliver. He took his fast-moving recon battalion out into the thick of the night, the sounds of battle rumbling in from the north like an unseen thunder storm. He swung wide around the left flank, and out into the gap the enemy had created in the lines of the 167th. There he found stragglers from a shattered battalion, who were very glad to see their own Panzer troops at hand.

He opened the hatch of his SdKfz-233 armored car, leaning out and waving the men over to him. His radio headset framed his face under a dark wool officers cap. "I'm looking for this new Russian infantry carrier. Have you seen them?"

"Seen them? They smashed our battalion twenty minutes ago."

"Where? What do they look like?"

The man hesitated, his eyes dark, and holding fear in them. "A very low profile," he began, "and with an angled hull—only forward, not back. There's a small turret forward, but beware. It packs a punch with a 76mm main gun, and by god, the damn thing is very fast—fully tracked. We thought they were new light tanks, but then they deployed infantry from a rear hatch. They'll only stop to do that if they have to. Otherwise, they just shoot from the firing ports along either side of the chassis. This is one wicked infantry carrier, and every battalion has them. They make our own Panzer SPWs look like goat carts by comparison. Be careful!"

"Where did you last see them?"

"Out there..." The man pointed out in to the black night, toward the gap

Hauser had selected as his hunting ground. “We were posted along the stream bed, but they went right through. The damn thing is amphibious too! They’ll be well south of that by now at the rate they were moving. Good hunting... and good luck if you find them.”

Hauser would not need that good luck, and he *would* find them. By his latest count, his recon battalion had 44 armored cars left, eight Marder-II’s, and six towed 75mm AT Guns. He also had fast moving mobile flak guns with him, and good Panzergrenadiers. He turned, going where he would go if he was the enemy, the thrill of the hunt on him now.

Chapter 21

Hauser always moved with a recovery team, several heavy SdKfz-7 and SdKfz-9 prime movers, among the best such vehicles in the war. The Germans had become masters of battlefield tank recovery, reclaiming about 75% of all tanks put out of service, and returning most of those to active duty. He did not want to get in to a chase scenario, or a running gun battle with his enemy, for the objective was to find one of these new vehicles without having to destroy it with gunfire. His instincts told him to look for a place where he might catch a straggler.

The ‘stream’ described by the infantry was actually the Lozova River, and he worked his way along that watercourse until he found exactly what he wanted. He came across a lot of track marks in the soft ground, and followed them to a crimp in the river where it flowed around a tree covered nob. The troops of the 167th had told him this vehicle was amphibious, but there he would find a lost sheep that had tried to cross in a place where it found more mud than water. It had become bogged down, half submerged, and its infantry squad was milling about trying to figure out how to get it unstuck.

Hauser pulled up a line of five armored cars, and fired three warning shots, deliberately missing the vehicle, but sending the infantry scrambling away in the dark, chased by his machinegun fire. Then he ordered his own Panzergrenadiers to dismount and sweep forward in the inky darkness, beckoning the vehicle recovery team on the radio. For the next hour, that was his sole purpose, dragging that vehicle out of the bog and eventually getting it onto a flatbed truck. All the while, he could hear sounds of fighting off to the north, knowing that Balck had the main body of the division there in an attack against the enemy flank.

When he finally found the General at field command post, he leapt down from his armored car, beaming from ear to ear.

“Well?” said Balck, knowing that the mischief in those eyes meant that Hauser had news.

“First things first,” said Hauser. “They’ve already crossed the Lozova River. I’d say at least a brigade went southwest from there.”

“The rest are making our acquaintance now,” said Balck. He had been smoking a cigar, and took a long drag.

“They went right through the 167th,” said Hauser. This is more serious than we thought. I think they will be at Grayvoron by dawn.”

“Too far west for us to get over there tonight. Better to just keep pressure on this flank, but they’ve brought up another tank corps. I had a look at this new AFV too, but only from a distance. The Tigers knocked out three before they pulled back.”

Then, almost as an afterthought, Hauser delivered his real news. “Oh, I’ve got one for you—found it bogged down near the river. It’s with my recovery team, along with two of my armored cars.”

“You’ve got one? Good for you!” Now Balck reached into his greatcoat and pulled out one more cigar. “There, you’ve earned that. Have them bring this thing here. Then get out and watch my left.”

* * *

Hauser’s catch was one small consolation in an otherwise grim picture all along the front. In spite of Balck’s counterattack in the north, there was still a 20 Kilometer gap between the place where Hauser had found his quarry and the town of Grayvoron. There, 9th Panzer had been trying to counterattack as well, but being already weakened from previous action, it could make no headway against the 3rd Mech Corps. Both the 167th and 168th Infantry Divisions were shattered and falling back in disarray, unable to offer any effective resistance within the breakthrough zone.

The whole of 1st Tank Army was now engaged with 6th and 11th Panzer, and they would be simply too much for the German divisions to push back. It was the first time in the war when the Panzertroops found themselves unable to make headway, even though their tanks were the equal or better of those fielded by the enemy. Between the two Panzer divisions, there were only eight battalions of infantry and two Panzer regiments of six companies each.

The enemy matched that with its 5th Guard Mech Corps alone, which fielded nine mechanized infantry battalions in the new BMP, and had three heavy armored brigades with 164 tanks. Then came the new 31st Tank Corps and the 6th. Those six additional brigades, plus three others from 7th Guards Army, added another 350 Soviet tanks and six more battalions of motorized infantry.

The Germans were simply overmatched, and it was only the skill of the soldiers, their officers and commander, that allowed them to shift forces from

one flank to another to parry the enemy attacks.

Further south near Kharkov, even Steiner's Korps was having great difficulty. Dietrich's division, in action now for six days of continuous fighting, was simply not up to the task of moving to the offensive. The *Grossdeutschland* Division moved through its ranks, encountering swarms of Russian infantry that would not turn and flee as it did in the past. Things had changed. The Soviets had pushed to within 5 kilometers of the city, and they could smell the victory they sought.

While this battle ground on, the real trouble spot on the Kharkov front was the sector just to the north, where *Das Reich* was on the line. It had been hit very hard by the bulk of the 3rd Guards army, which had two strong mobile corps added. It was able to drive the division back over the main road to Mikhaylovka, and push another 5 kilometers, just shy of the Kharkov river flowing down from the north. Success by *Grossdeutschland* Division was therefore offset by this setback to the north, and Manstein could now see that his counterattack would not succeed.

We sallied forth, he thought, but we cannot drive them from our gates. Now I am facing a situation that will see my best mobile troops stuck in a static battle of attrition, for this will surely be settled in the city soon, block by block, and house by house. While that fight grinds on, the enemy is free to operate to the south. They have already pushed through Taranovka. The hole in our lines just yawns open there, some 60 kilometers wide, and there is nothing there but the *Wiking* Division. I need to get Steiner out of this mess, and out where he can maneuver, but this damnable order from the Führer that Kharkov be held is frustrating that plan. This is my own damn fault. I promised him we would hold the city to placate him for the orders I sent so brazenly to OKW.

What I need now is infantry to replace Steiner if it comes to a city fight, but doing that under pressure will be difficult. Hansen has freed up two more divisions, and they are enroute from the Caucasus this very day. Yet the most direct route by rail has already been cut. They could come up through Krasnograd, and then the temptation to use them with the *Wiking* Division would be very great.

If, however, I send them through Krasnograd, there is a junction further north that could take them back through Poltava, and from there they would approach Kharkov from the west instead of southwest. First things first—get them up through Krasnograd. It may be that the better play is to try and pull

divisions from 4th Army. I don't like the cauldron that is forming to the north. Balck has managed to tie up Katukov, but he can only buy me time. Knobelsdorff is simply too weak, and I would need at least one more panzer division there to have any chance of stopping Katukov.

Meanwhile, in the south, Kirchner hit the flank of that bridgehead at Andreyevka, but the enemy just keeps reinforcing it. Last night the Luftwaffe recon flights spotted what looks to be an entire new army crossing the river at Andreyevka. I must get Steiner free of this city, even if it means giving Kharkov to the enemy.

It was time for one of those uncomfortable choices. He called Speidel and told him to order General Raus to bring his two division Korps to Kharkov at once. Raus was due north, and he could use the rail line through Dergachi to move his equipment quickly.

"Then the rest of 4th Army will have to fold back to make a linkup with Knobelsdorff," said Speidel.

"It can be done," said Manstein. "Their pursuit along Kempf's front has not been all that aggressive. Frankly, I think they want us to hold our positions there. They were counting on Katukov getting in behind Kempf, and thinking they might have a pocket forming. That will not happen. If we do this right, and we will, then I think we can also free up 3rd Panzergrenadier Division. Send that one to Knobelsdorff, and he'll know what to do with it."

"That front is starting to stabilize," said Speidel. "The three divisions from Armeegruppe Center have formed up behind the breakthrough zone. Balck's spoiling attack worked wonders," said Speidel. "Katukov got into a boxing match with the best division in the Army, and he's been stopped cold. Balck is just moving from one side of the ring to another, jabbing, dancing, a real master. He called to say he got one of the new Russian AFVs."

"Oh? That should be interesting."

"Indeed!" Speidel seemed in high spirits, then he took a deep breath. "What about Hitler?"

"Efendi?" Manstein smiled. "He's already come and gone, and I don't think we'll see him again any time soon. In fact, he won't hear about any of this until late tomorrow. I intend to inform OKW, and urge Zeitzler to rubber stamp this move. Hitler was quite heavy on that point—no withdrawals unless approved by OKW. Well, I can only wait so long for such approval. I must be able to act in a crisis like this."

“What are you planning?”

“Steiner has to move. So Raus gets Kharkov, and I’m going to swing southwest and surprise Kuznetsov. He had a good chance to push around the city, but the *Wiking* s gave him pause. Now we’ll get out of this damn city fight and do some maneuvering. Don’t worry. If this works, Hitler will be quite pleased.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“It’s always a risky thing, this business of war. You know what Napoleon said. It is but one step from triumph to fall. I’ll try not to stumble.”

Manstein’s order to ‘readjust’ the front would enable him to pull three divisions off the line. Yet it would also allow the enemy to consolidate their own front, and they would be stronger at every point along that line. It was now a question of time. What he had to do was get mobile forces capable of inflicting damage on the enemy into a position where they could stop the inexorable flow of forces over the Donets. This would require him to present the enemy with a situation where their LOC was clearly threatened, meaning that their ability to sustain any further move south would be in jeopardy.

Yet there were several flaws in the plan. First, as the Field Marshal had said, it was risky. Trying to extricate forces under heavy enemy pressure could have unforeseen negative consequences, but he had accepted the worst of them—the possible loss of Kharkov. Secondly, while his recent counterpunches had demonstrated that they could stop the enemy advances, not one had been able to truly push them back. Just one month ago he had chased Popov back across the Don, but then he had three SS divisions in the perfect position to do so. Since that time, something had changed, and the dark answer he had to face was that the enemy had been strongly reinforcing the front to try again.

The arrival of 8th Guards Army in the north had restored that sector after the damage inflicted by *Zitadelle* . Now the 47th Army had moved onto the line in the south to replace the losses Manstein had inflicted on 63rd Army, and the center had been reinforced with the arrival of 4th Guards Army and 27th Army, both flowing into the wide breach between Andreyevka and Kharkov.

Now Manstein would take yet another risk. Though he had two infantry divisions coming up from the Caucasus, the withdrawal of Korps Raus had provided him with infantry to defend Kharkov. He also had the 7th Infantry Division from Armeegruppe Center, and he hoped that would be enough. So

he abandoned the plan to move 44th Korps under Angelis through Krasnograd and Poltava to try and reach the city from the west. What he needed now was some stronger threat to the enemy bridges at Andreyevka. It was there that Kirchner's 57th Korps had been attacking unsuccessfully against the base of the bridgehead. It needed help.

Risk.

It was at the heart of mobile warfare, like the daring foray of a Knight into the enemy camp, or the sweep of a Bishop to a far-off square on the diagonal. He would send those two infantry divisions to Kirchner, and more, he would now order General Gille to leave off his screening operation and move southwest to join that concentration of forces as well.

Speed, concentration and power—these were the essential ingredients of the German art of maneuver war. Manstein needed to get his forces where they could act as a lever against the massive boulder of the Soviet incursion over the Donets. In his mind, he was slowly setting up his counterattack plan, wishing only that he had acted sooner. It had only been his promise to hold Kharkov that had forced a delay, but now he would act, and take the consequences.

To sweeten the broth when he sent his message to OKW, he indicated that he was now moving to implement “Operation *Donnerschlag*, ” (Thunderclap), and he intended this as a means of throwing a bone to Hitler. If the Führer thought a counterattack was imminent, he might be less likely to interfere with the troop movements Manstein had ordered. That was the final risk he was taking—that all of this could be reversed at the whim of Adolf Hitler.

If that could be avoided, he hoped to have three infantry divisions in Kharkov before nightfall on June 2nd, and then he would begin pulling Steiner's troops out and offer the enemy the city-fight they seemed intent upon. That night, the trains flowed in Kharkov, the grey infantry disembarking with well-practiced efficiency, their officers collecting companies, building battalions, and then marching them off to their assigned post in the city. Manstein was creating another Volgograd, but just as in that battle, he would not fight there with Steiner's Korps.

That same night, Hitler would arrive at OKW after his long plane ride, and thankfully, he would retire for the evening to rest. That gave Zeitzler time to collect all the latest situation reports, and he noted the arrival of three infantry divisions at Kharkov. With Steiner there as well, that would secure

the city and at least remove that topic from the next day's discussion. As to Operation *Donnerschlag* , he sent a message asking for details to be forwarded 'as soon as feasible.'

The General knew enough to know that Manstein had something in the oven, and he was not going to pull it out and stick his thumb in it until he knew more. At the very least, this would keep Hitler out of the decision loop for another twelve hours, and by then he believed he would learn what was happening.

He smiled inwardly. The old fox is up to something again, he thought. I did not think he would get away with things as he did, cancelling *Zitadelle* , ordering both Model and Kempf to withdraw, not to mention Hollidt as well. So now he is planning a counterattack? That can only mean one thing. He is going to move Steiner, and that explains the movement of Korps Raus and the 7th Division into Kharkov.

General Zeitzler could read a map.

Part VIII

The Road to Taranovka

*“The hardest thing of all is to find a black cat in a dark room,
especially if there is no cat.”*

—Confucius

Chapter 22

By the early morning of June 3, the front had stabilized. The Germans had given up a good deal of ground, all in the effort to shorten their lines, and the arrival of six new Infantry Divisions had filled in the line where the 10th Korps had been smashed in the north. It's 167th and 168th Divisions now had to combine their remaining troops into one formation, and even that was weaker than a single line infantry division should have been. Knobelsdorff had been informed that 3rd Panzergrenadier Division was being sent to him, and now he might do even more to stop Katukov from regaining any momentum.

Balck had stopped the powerful 5th Mech Corps, skillfully using both 11th and 6th Panzer Divisions in the two-day battle. In the center, there were places where the advancing Soviet troops in 5th and 8th Guards Armies had simply lost contact with the retreating German infantry of 4th Army. North of Kharkov, there was heavily wooded terrain, and Kempf was wise enough to fall back on that natural defensive advantage to strengthen his lines.

Closer to the city, *Das Reich* was still under heavy pressure from 3rd Guards Army, and so Manstein lined up 32 heavy Lions in the 502 *Schwerepanzer* Battalion as a defensive screen, and pulled 2nd SS off the line. 3rd SS had already concentrated in the city, ready to move at first light. *Grossdeutschland* Division and *Leibstandarte* were still on the line south of the city, buying time for Korps Raus to get into good defensive positions. Just before sunrise, the SS would begin pulling out under the cover of heavy grey skies.

With a wave of his cape, the wily master strategist of the Wehrmacht had pulled off his sleight of hand, and deftly extricated Steiner's divisions all along the front. The cost had been three kilometers, as Raus had to form his line up right at the edge of the city behind the SS. The Russians would gain this extra thin slice of the apple, advancing towards the shadowy grey city that morning, and wondering whether the Germans had given it up. They would be quite mistaken. Korps Raus, which had once been holding a frontage over twenty kilometers with its two divisions, was now nicely concentrated on an eight-kilometer line that ran all along the southeast edge of the city. Furthermore, it was reinforced with the addition of the 7th

Infantry Division.

The only SS units that would be left behind were Wagner's Nordland Division, because of its preponderance of useful infantry, and the two Reichsführer brigades. Both Ferdinand battalions would remain for AT support, but Manstein ordered the faster moving Panthers of the 51st and 52nd Battalions to move out with *Grossdeutschland*.

That morning, he took the main road west, which passed just north of Yubotin, and then swung around a large woodland, following the rail line to Poltava. After a time, it diverged southwest towards Valki, eventually reaching Poltava by running south of the Komag River, while the rail line ran north of that watercourse.

German defensive tactics against Russian breakthroughs of this scale usually mandated an attack on the flank of the enemy advance. This was what Manstein had tried to do when he launched Steiner from Kharkov, and 57th Panzer Korps towards Andreyevka, but in both cases, the attacks encountered enemy strength too thick to penetrate. In effect, the shoulders of the breakthrough were too secure, and were, in fact, zones where the enemy was still concentrating the bulk of his offensive forces. The Russians were not pushing aggressively in the center of the breakthrough, where the roads to Poltava beckoned them to advance. Instead they were fixated on Kharkov, attacking it from the northern shoulder with 1st Guard Tank Army, and then busy reinforcing their crossing at Andreyevka with the two Siberian Motor Rifle Corps.

"If they really had the strength to do so," said Speidel, "then they would have advanced towards Poltava."

"Not while Steiner was at Kharkov," said Manstein. "Kuznetsov could not push on with a force that strong on his right shoulder. This is why he tried to envelop the city from the south, but he could not even do that while Steiner was heavily concentrated. The risk of a counterattack, just as we tried on the 1st, was simply too great. So he had no choice but to turn for the city early, and see if he could win the battle against Steiner."

"Well, we stopped him," said Speidel. "A pity Kirchner could not make any progress against the southern shoulder."

"The arrival of their 27th Army doomed that attack," said Manstein.

"Yes," said Speidel. "What is strange here is that they sent their Guards infantry divisions out into the center of the breakthrough. They are strong, but slow moving, and that is not the kind of force I would have expected to

see there.”

“I think it was happenstance,” said Manstein. “When the *Wiking* Division appeared there, it challenged the advance they were making with their 10th Mech Corps. I think they got a bit edgy. The *Wiking* Division came up very quickly by rail from the Dnieper, and they were not certain what else we had in the cupboard. Their Guardsmen were clearing the Luftwaffe out of the Zimyeve area, and they were the closest reserve to call in when the *Wiking* Division made their spoiling attack. So yes, now that Guards infantry force is holding the center of their breakthrough, and Kuznetsov has not moved all his mobile forces there.”

“What do we do now?” Speidel’s eyes played over the map.

“We could do nothing in the clinch near Kharkov,” said Manstein, but now, with Raus in position to hold the city, we can maneuver again. Even though it violates doctrine, I’m going to swing Steiner southwest and then hit the center of their breakthrough. We must not turn too early, because they have interior lines, and fast moving Mech units that could react. Then we would just have the battle we were fighting near the city back again. As we move southwest, the Guards infantry will not be fast enough to interfere, so we can choose any point of attack we might wish.”

“What if he realizes his dilemma and pulls 1st Guard Tank out to come after us.”

“That is what he should do, but it would mean he must end his attack on Kharkov from the south.”

“He could withdraw his guardsmen for that,” said Speidel.

“True, but that would take them two days, and it’s rather tricky to pull off, especially when facing an aggressive attack by the enemy. In any case, if Kuznetsov attempts that, he is dancing to our tune. Don’t you see? This move by Steiner gives us back the initiative. I will stop his attack on the southern segment of the city, not by fighting to the last man with Steiner, as Efendi might order, but by maneuver, and the indirect approach. This is what we are best at, and how we must fight now.”

“If we move southwest, where will we turn?”

“I think we will move through Valki, and then perhaps we can make a push for Novaya Vologda. After that, the ground is better, and note how all the watercourses move southeast, so they will not be obstacles. That will be the direction of our counterattack—to this place, Taranovka. If we get that far, we will have popped their balloon. From there we can threaten Zimyeve

from the southwest, or simply turn south and smash these forces facing off against the *Wiking* Division. This maneuver rides roughshod right through the heart of their breakthrough, and challenges Kuznetsov to break off his attack and come down to try and stop us.”

“What if he does something unexpected? He could attack through Yubotin after we have moved southwest, and continue his envelopment operation.”

“Let him try. This is why I think we must leave *Das Reich* behind in the city. It needs rest, and it could stand as a good mobile reserve. I’ll take *Grossdeutschland*, *Leibstandarte* and *Totenkopf* for this operation. Then we will see if they can dance.”

* * *

General Kuznetsov could see that something was amiss. The dark uniforms and distinctive insignia of the 1st SS Division he had been battling for days was now replaced with a fresh infantry division, the 7th. They have also pulled many other SS formations off the line and replaced them with infantry they brought down from the north. Wounded or not, this is still a dangerous bear, he thought.

“Some reconnaissance reports,” said a staff officer. “Artillery, a few tanks, and some recon elements a few kilometers north of Yubotin.”

“Any units identified?”

“No sir, the cloud cover is very thick this morning and this was all the air recon reported.”

“It could be a reinforcement, but I doubt that,” said Kuznetsov. The only rail movement spotted was the arrival of this infantry division. I think they need to rest their SS units in the city.”

“Yes sir, we do know that their 2nd SS is there. That unit was seen clear enough in these photographs. It could not be any other formation.” The officer pointed out the position, showing columns of AFVs moving towards the city from the northeast, and Kuznetsov nodded. He was a heavy-set man, thick cheeked, with short cropped grey hair, receding.

“General Burkov with 10th Tank Corps has come north,” said the officer, “but there is still nothing in front of him. He reached Fedorovka last night, and wants to know if he should push on to Valki and cut the road.”

Kuznetsov looked at the map. “He could not do so with any strength.

Look—his Corps is spread out on too wide a front. Besides, they are not using that road. All their supplies and reinforcements are coming in by rail, which is something the air force should get after. No, just tell Burkov to watch these three roads as he is now.”

“Very good, sir.”

“What is 7th Tank Corps doing?” asked Kuznetsov.

“Still cleaning up the flank on the left. Their infantry line goes as far as these woods south of Yubotin.”

“They have been trying to keep this rail line open,” said Kuznetsov. “Otherwise anything coming from Poltava must take this junction west of Yubotin, and go all the way around through Dergachi. Let 7th Corps continue to clean up that flank, and then we will see about pushing on to Yubotin. As for today, we keep hammering their line at the edge of the city. Has the artillery been resupplied?”

“Two truck columns arrived last night under cover of darkness. More will be expected tomorrow.”

“Good. Tell them to use it. Let Steiner hear our guns again, even if he is resting in the city.”

“Will we take it sir? These infantry divisions make for a strong reinforcement.”

“They do, but don’t forget Katukov in the north. Is he advancing again?”

“Not yet, sir. He’s still engaged with their 11th Panzer Division.”

Kuznetsov inclined his head, thinking. He knew that division. It always seemed to turn up at any point of real crisis. Well, he thought, let Katukov worry about it.

* * *

Steiner was long gone, but General Kuznetsov did not know that. The thick cloud cover had hindered Soviet aerial recon missions, and the few units they had spotted were dismissed as minor rear area detachments. So taking every advantage of the heavy grey skies, Manstein ordered Steiner to move on the very road, through Valki, that Kuznetsov had dismissed as irrelevant. 3rd SS was through that afternoon. *Grossdeutschland* Division was moving on a parallel track, overland just a few kilometers to the north. They found the mud had dried up, and the ground was nice and firm for fast cross-country movement.

General Burkov was very lucky he got those orders to stay put, for if he had pushed out to Valki, he would have discovered what was happening, but much like a bear sticking its paw into a hornet's nest. Manstein had requested heavy air cover from the Luftwaffe, and their aim was to keep prying eyes from seeing the movement. The column was now 20 kilometers long, three full divisions moving in daylight.

That afternoon, only a very few low-level recon missions got through, spotting recon vehicles, a company of motorcycle infantry, a regimental sized unit of mechanized grenadiers, and some bridging units. They were all on the main road to Valki, and late in the day, Burkov gave an order to fire off a salvo from his 10th Rocket Regiment, just for harassment. His widely scattered 10th Tank Corps was sitting no more than seven or eight kilometers from that road, but the lay of the land, with thick intervening woodland, masked the German movement. The distant sound of the Army artillery firing against the southern edge of Kharkov also muffled the movement of the long German column.

Kuznetsov continued to hammer at the city defenses, knowing that the strong 3rd Guards was making slow but steady progress to the north. When troops from the 2nd SS Division had to be sent in to shore up the line again, it only confirmed his assumption that Steiner was still there, his SS waiting unseen behind the infantry front to deliver these well-timed counterpunches. He had what he wanted, a battle of attrition, and was counting on Katukov solving his problem in the north and continuing his advance.

But he was wrong....

3rd Panzergrenadier Division had just arrived to bring Knobelsdorff up to proper strength. With that division, and the infantry Model had sent, the Germans had sewn together their shattered front, and had continuous lines again, all the way back to Kharkov.

Hitler came to the map room at OKW for a situation report late in the day, still weary from his travel. Zeitzler had good news for him.

"My Führer," he said. "This is the latest situation report, and as you can see, the redistribution of forces ordered by General Manstein has closed the front up and eliminated the gap in the north."

"What about this!" Hitler could not help but see the massive gap in the center. "What is to stop them from going all the way to Poltava?"

"Steiner," said Zeitzler.

"What? Steiner is defending Kharkov. What are you saying?"

“No longer,” said Zeitzler. “Korps Raus has taken over the outer defense, and that line is holding. Steiner began pulling out last night. His divisions should be about here, passing through Valki.”

“Steiner has been sent to defend that frontage? What if they get through the infantry. Kharkov would be lost, and that must not happen!”

“*Das Reich* remains in the city on reserve. They will not get through, and Steiner has not gone to take up defensive positions. He is attacking.” Zeitzler looked at his watch. “It will be dark there soon, and Steiner will make good use of that. We believe his movement has largely gone undetected thus far. Manstein now has three strong divisions, and we believe he is bringing the Korps here, to attack the enemy breakthrough south of Novaya Vologda into this gap. My Führer, Operation *Donnerschlag* should begin at tonight.”

“Operation *Donnerschlag*?” It was obvious that Hitler liked the sound of that—*Thunderclap*—and it would come with thunderclap surprise to Vasily Kuznetsov, a major counterattack, prepared and assembled without detection, and aimed at his widely expanded breakthrough zone, but 50 kilometers south of all his principle mobile assets.

The miracle worker had performed one more strategic trick, and now it remained for his troops to do the job they had before them. If one had to give such a mission to any three divisions in the army, *Grossdeutschland* , *Leibstandarte* , and *Totenkopf* would be excellent choices, and they would be driving into the operational zone of one more fabled division, the 5th SS *Wiking* .

Chapter 23

Kuznetsov was awakened at 04:00 with the news. The recon battalion and assault gun regiment of 10th Tank Corps had been hit near midnight by German Panzer troops.

“Panzers? What division? Has anything been identified?”

“Yes sir,” the staff officer looked confused. “It says they were SS troops from the 1st Division, and others from their Guards Division. How did they get there? We thought they were still in the city.”

“Apparently not,” said the General, leaning heavily as he got up off the bed in the burnt-out hotel at Zimyeve. He had set up his headquarters there to avoid German *Stukas*, finding a few rooms on the lower floors still intact. Minutes later he was heading for the radio, needing to know more. He soon learned that Burkov had reacted to the incident by pulling his tank corps together and moving through the village of Fedorovka, where he ran into SS troops from the 1st Division, confirming the reports.

There were still too many unanswered questions in his mind. Troops from two German mobile divisions had been identified, but soon he had a report from the 60th Guards Rifle Division. It had been posted on the extreme left of his infantry in the breakthrough zone, and it had moved one regiment to the sound of the fighting that night. The only thing they found were a few companies of German recon units, with some engineers. Tanks had been reported moving further northwest, but no one had encountered them.

What was going on here? Was this what it seemed to be, a movement of two German mobile divisions to his flank? Was it merely a feint, a spoiling attack? Then he got news that small detachments of German troops had been harassing the lines of his infantry much further south, and that the German *Wiking* Division had suddenly pulled out of its defensive positions and moved into a night action against 4th Guard Army further south. The 3rd Guard Tank Corps reported heavy casualties, and they had pulled back two kilometers to regroup. He would be making a good many calls that morning.

A tickle here, a punch there, he thought. The Germans have finally realized we have been slowly expanding that bridgehead, and now they are trying to do something about it. But how strong will this counterattack be if one comes. I will likely not learn enough about the situation until morning. In

the meantime, it may be wise to create a mobile reserve, but with what? Everything at hand is on the line. If I pull anything off, it would have to come from my left, otherwise I will weaken my attack on the city.

Seleikov's 7th Tank Corps is there, and it is just screening that sector. I could detach it and send it south to join Burkov.... That will be the order.

It was a logical first response to a situation that was not yet understood, but it would not be enough. Two hours later Kuznetsov learned that Burkov's probing maneuver through Fedorovka had run into fire and brimstone, and the leading half of his corps was suddenly attacked by the entire 1st SS Division. At the same time, the 60th Guards, a few kilometers to the south, were swarmed over by the fast moving *Grossdeutschland* Division. Still farther south, 44th Guards was being hit by 3rd SS.

Three divisions, he thought with great alarm, and the sudden realization of what his crafty enemy had done. They must have pulled out completely, and marched all day and night to reach those positions. Now they are smashing into the outer frontier of our breakthrough along a 20-kilometer front. All this other action in the south is meant only to tie up those forces and prevent them from reacting to this counterattack. 10th Tank Corps is unsupported. I must get a mobile force together at once, and the 7th Tank Corps will not do the job by itself. All my good infantry is spread out on a wide front. We must fall back and concentrate!

Reports that the Germans had launched a spoiling attack against his near left flank were more frustrating than serious. The German 36th Infantry division, which had been on defense for days, suddenly advanced against that flank, and some fast-moving Luftwaffe flak units actually made it as far as the main road and rail line leading southwest to Alexandrovka and on to Novaya Vodolaga. This meant that the assault on Kharkov could not be continued that morning, as it was now necessary to secure that flank. 2nd Mech would have to go defensive, and allow 1st Mech to intervene, with 1st Guards Tank providing the necessary muscle.

The General would get no breakfast that morning, nor would a good many men of the 1st Guards Army. Before the sun would rise, the 60th Guards Rifle division would sustain 70% casualties, and virtually cease to exist.

* * *

So it has begun, thought Manstein, a cold lump of fear in his chest in spite

of his outer air of confidence. The movement was superb, the timing perfect, and we have achieved complete surprise. Yet they are only three divisions, which is why Kirchner must jog left and the *Wiking* Division must punch hard as well. Their Guards infantry will fight, and I have no doubt that they will fall back to consolidate and strengthen their lines. They will be the first hard shield to crack, but our lances are still sharp.

Steiner relayed reports in a flurry back to Manstein at his HQ in Kharkov. *Totenkopf* had smashed the 60th Guards, but was still fighting through remnants and small pockets of resistance. *Grossdeutschland* had engaged 44th Guards, driven it back and surrounded a brigade, but enemy tanks had appeared and they were trying to break through to rescue the trapped Guardsmen. Now third in the column as the attack swung south, *Leibstandarte* also reported the enemy was counterattacking with massed armored brigades.

The 7th and 10th Tank Corps had finally moved down through Novaya Vodolaga and charged to the attack. Kuznetsov had pulled his shield in tight, and now he struck out with a sword. Manstein did not want his attack to broaden out too much and lose concentration, and he radioed Steiner to maneuver, reform, and hit along a narrower front further south. He wanted to get the SS Korps closer to Kirchner's 57th, where the two mobile groups could support one another and become one massive counterpunch. The breakthrough was too large to attempt a pincer operation. He had to hit, move, hit again, and slowly beat the Soviet incursion back.

Near dusk stragglers from a lost battalion of the 60th Guards reached the area where 10th Tank Corps was operating, with tales of woe. This prompted Burkov to post two battalions of motor rifle infantry on that flank, and he sent out patrols to make certain he would not be ambushed from that direction in the coming darkness.

After sunset, the Germans seemed to vanish. They were only found on the main road to Krasnograd, where a sharp engagement was underway with the 1st SS, but that was only a rearguard. Steiner had pulled everything out and was rolling south under cover of darkness. In the morning, he wanted to appear somewhere else and regain the momentum afforded by surprise. With a wolf like that prowling in the dark, Manstein knew the Russians would not make any aggressive moves, or ever contemplate a movement towards Poltava. They would hunker down, consolidate, and seek information on the enemy movements.

Kuznetsov was taking no chances with this situation. He had pulled his best unit, the 1st Guards Tank, out of the attack on Kharkov, and that night it would move south to Novaya Vodolaga. This would give him his entire 1st Guard Tank Army to operate against the flank of any German offensive. Given the axis of attack the previous day, he was expecting the Germans to continue to drive east towards Taranovka, and the engagement on the Krasnograd road reinforced this belief.

Elsewhere, a stony silence had settled over the front. After five days of fighting, *Rumyantsev* had been brought to a halt. The only real progress that had been made in the last two days was a minor bridgehead near the twisting course of the Donets northwest of Izyum. The 2nd Shock Army had crossed at Zaliman, and slowly carved out a nest in the bend of the river, pressing against the left flank of Hollidt's 50th Infantry Division. The Siberians could only move in one direction, west, for the river made a big U-turn, doubling back on itself and the way south was now blocked by that water barrier and thick, heavily wooded hills. Otherwise, a calm settled over the front. Even Katukov had been forced to accept a stalemate in his duel with Knobelsdorff's four mobile divisions in the north.

The action was in the center, and both Manstein and Kuznetsov knew that the outcome of the battle rested there. That bridgehead was the major strategic advantage obtained by the Russians. The advance on Kharkov had been the magnet to pull in German forces, but the lodgment south of the Donets could deliver far more than that single city. It had opened the way to the Dnieper. Now Manstein was battling to destroy it, and Kuznetsov realized he must do everything possible to prevent that from happening.

To that end, he called General Leylushenko of the 3rd Guards Army, the sledgehammer that was operating north of Kharkov. That army had been reinforced with the addition of Mostrovenko's 3rd Tank Corps, and Obukhov's 3rd Guard Mech. He wanted them both, and was willing to accept a draw in the battle for the city until the issue was settled in the breakthrough zone.

The engagement on the road was only Steiner's rearguard, meant to do exactly what it had accomplished and draw in the Soviet mobile units to that sector. All that night, *Totenkopf* and *Grossdeutschland* moved south, reaching the Brerstovaya River flowing southwest to Krasnograd, and then turning northeast at midnight. That watercourse ran parallel to a secondary road that led through a series of small towns, Melekhova, Okhochaye, and

finally Manstein's objective, Taranovka. In doing so they had joined up with the *Wiking* Division, and by 03:00 they would be close enough to support the attack of Kirchner's 57th Panzer Korps, which was pushing due north toward that same target.

Manstein was lining up his chariots.

* * *

Zhukov flew to the front to meet with both Rokossovsky and Vatutin and assess the situation. He praised them for the progress made, and then got down to business.

"The momentum has stalled," he said frankly. "How can we regain it?"

"They gave ground and reformed their line," said Rokossovsky. In fact, they deliberately allowed us to get close to the city, and now they are dug in deep. This is what allowed them to pull out most of the SS, and now they are operating against our bridgehead."

"The city is a figurehead," said Zhukov. "Taking it will make the headlines, but the real business at hand is protecting this bridgehead and getting to the Dnieper. I do not want to be rolled up and pushed back over the Donets. Have we been hurt there?"

"One of our bears took a bite on the front paw," said Rokossovsky. "1st Guards Army lost a good rifle division, but they have tightened their lines, and 4th Guards Army is secure."

"And the base of the left shoulder?" Zhukov looked at Vatutin now, and the heavy-set General nodded.

"Trefimenko's 27th Army crossed at Andreyevka and reinforced the Siberian Motor Rifle Corps. The Siberian units can hold a lot of frontage, but they are not as strong as a field army. The German 57th Tank Corps has been very aggressive there. They pushed back Kuliev's 1st Guard Cavalry Corps, but the arrival of the 27th allowed the Siberians to move west and relieve them. The line is still solid."

"But it is anchored very close to the bridges at Andreyevka."

"We have crossed further east," said Vatutin.

"That small bridgehead might be of some use," said Zhukov, if we only had another field army to cross there. Luckily, this 57th Tank Corps has not chosen to attack the base of your bridgehead. A push of no more than five kilometers would close that bridge."

“True, but that would only affect 27th Army. We have depots at Taranovka in the bridgehead itself, and another behind the river east of Zimyeve. The bridgehead armies would remain in supply.”

“Where is Steiner?”

“He has been very cagy,” said Vatutin. “After slipping out of Kharkov two days ago, Kuznetsov thought he was going to push for Taranovka, so he pulled out all of 1st Tank Army to block him.”

“Which ended our assault on Kharkov,” said Zhukov.

“For the moment,” said Rokossovsky.

“And what is Kuznetsov doing now?” Zhukov seemed impatient.

“There is fighting on the road to Krasnograd, and now we are getting reports of assaults all along the line of 1st Guards Army.”

Zhukov gave them a knowing nod of his head. “They are attempting to roll back our bridgehead.”

“The road to Poltava is only lightly screened,” said Rokossovsky.

“Indeed,” said Zhukov, “and that is exactly where Manstein wants us to go. Yet we cannot do so with Steiner on the loose out there. Don’t forget Popov in April, and the Fighting at Volkov Yar. He has managed to line up Steiner with this other mobile Korps in the south, and that could mean trouble. We must kill this wolf before we can count any more sheep with this offensive.”

“Kuznetsov wanted the mobile elements of 3rd Shock Group,” said Rokossovsky. “I approved the request.”

“Good.” Now Zhukov looked at the map. “Order Kuznetsov to continue his battle on the enemy left. That is the road to Krasnograd, yes? As for the mobile forces from 3rd Shock Group, send them to Taranovka. He is clenching his fist, and so we must do the same. How many divisions are in this enemy 57th Corps?”

“Three, but only one has tanks.”

“And Steiner has only three of the SS divisions,” said Vatutin.

“So that will give us five corps against his six mobile divisions.” Zhukov was thinking. “We still need more. I see that 3rd Shock Group’s front ends right at the city. Can they extend any farther south?”

“I believe they could.”

“Very well. Kuznetsov still has two Mech Corps west of the city. They are just holding the shoulder of that attempted envelopment. I want them pulled out and return to 1st Guard Tank Army. If that means we give up a

little ground there, so be it. Have 3rd Shock army extend its front to cover the city. Then send the two Mech Corps to Taranovka as well. That will be the center of the wheel. We will have interior lines, and can therefore respond easily to any sector of the bridgehead defense that needs support. Once we have everything in place, then we can attack.”

Zhukov wanted every piece he could find focused on the center of the board. The pawns would have to hold on the flanks. Of course, ordering these things and seeing them carried out promptly and efficiently were two different things. Uncertain of where Steiner had moved that night, Kuznetsov decided not to blunder about in the dark, waiting for daylight to give him a better picture.

3rd Shock Army did move, for darkness was a friend when attempting to disengage from its positions close to the enemy at the edge of the city. An enormous army, it had six rifle divisions, three cavalry and six independent rifle brigades, with three supporting armored regiments. This was more than enough to extend its front southwest from the city to the Udy River, and the wooded terrain beyond. This allowed both of Kuznetsov’s mech corps to pull out of the frontage where they had been holding off the German 7th Infantry Division, and they moved south to rejoin 1st Guard Tank Army.

At the same time, the mobile elements of 3rd Shock Group started moving south towards the bridgehead as well, heading for Zimyeve. If all these forces could be concentrated near Taranovka, the Soviets would have a force more than capable of taking on the German threat—a force that might finally meet and defeat the arch nemesis that had frustrated one offensive after another for the last year of the war—Steiner’s SS Korps.

Arriving at just the right time, general Georgie Zhukov had surmised the enemy’s intent and did exactly what was necessary to counter it. The Russians had their own master strategist as well, and after seeing so many of his advances stopped by Manstein, Zhukov now had something to prove.

Chapter 24

Kirchner had attacked all night, throwing 17th Panzer and his two Panzergrenadier Divisions against the 1st Siberian Motor Rifle Corps. He had beaten off the cavalry, which was regrouping to the rear, and now he ploughed right into this relieving force, hoping to make further headway before the Russians could dismount and get to good positions on the ground.

A dour faced man of 56 years at this time, Kirchner had joined the Royal Saxon Army at the age of 14, and had risen to command 1st Panzer Division at the outset of the war. Now he had the Korps that he would command for the duration of the conflict, and he had been driving for the town of Velikaya Bereka, about 5 kilometers north of his spearheads. He was slowly breaking up the enemy battalions, forcing them back, but his troops were becoming exhausted from the long three-day action without rest.

To the west of that town, Kuliev's 1st Guard Cavalry Corps had been resting all night after losing their battle with the Germans the previous day. Now they would be called to action again. Their brigades were mixed bags; predominantly mounted cavalry, but with a company of motorcycle troops, another of T-40 light tanks, and a few Gaz 37mm AA guns on halftracks. There were nine brigades in all, and now they lined up for a charge reminiscent of the sweeping Cossack attacks in the Russian Civil War. Many in those ranks had come from Karpov's best horsemen in Siberia, and now they would ride to the rescue of the crumbling lines of their brothers.

It would be trumpets and sabres at dawn, a rare event, for the Soviets had been re-training those troops to simply think of their horses as transportation, and to fight as dismounted infantry. Now, however, the urgency of the hour saw them mount up and charge, the rolling drumbeat of the hooves seeming an anachronism on a battlefield where it was tanks and APC's that now ground up the turf. The Italian Savoia Cavalry had mounted a desperate charge like this in late 1942, much bigger than the British charge at Omdurman in 1898 that Churchill had seen. This one would eclipse them both, and rewrite the history on that score—the last great charge of mounted horsemen in the war. The sabres would gleam in the early light, yet it would not be those blades that would do any damage, but the grenades the soldiers

would fling wildly about if they reached the German line.

First they had to get through the MG-42's, and the fire from armored cars and tanks. They soon found that no matter how brave, mounted men on horses were no match for the steel of modern weapons. Kirchner called in his artillery, and the lethal rounds wreaked havoc on the charging cavalry, sabers and all. 17th Panzer had a full battalion of Lions, and they calmly lined up, the big turrets swiveling to bring those long barrels to bear on the enemy like a line of lethal pikes. But these pikes spit fire and death.

One gallant rider actually made it through the machineguns and when he found himself staring at the long 88mm barrel of a Lion, and with no more grenades, he beat upon that cold steel with his sabre in a gesture of futile bravery. Seconds later he was gunned down by a Panzergrenadier.

Weary or not, Kirchner ordered his men to continue their attack, for he knew that Steiner had appeared far to his left and that he was now attacking the enemy bridgehead. Hermann Balck had coined the phrase: 'night marches are life savers,' and perhaps that would be proved true again. Kirchner had done the job of engaging and weakening the lines of the Siberians, and now Steiner was bringing a hammer to 1st Guards Army.

That battle would prove to be much more difficult than Manstein expected. The dogged Guardsmen held on, giving ground stubbornly, and in the north of that attack, *Leibstandarte* found that it was tangling with both 7th and 10th Tank Corps. In the midst of this fight, up came Mikhail Panov with the whole of 1st Guards Tank Corps. It was quickly staged to join the fight, and now Dietrich found he was triple teamed on the left of the German attack.

On his right, *Grossdeutschland* Division had been making good progress against the enemy Guards infantry, driving them out of the woodland and back towards the winding flow of a wandering stream. The Soviets were pouring on the army artillery, three full regiments, in an effort to halt the German attack.

Zhukov suspected Steiner was moving to counterattack somewhere, but when the news came that the SS had engaged on a wide front, he was not surprised. If they had concentrated, he thought, they would have surely penetrated the outer defense of our bridgehead, but it would have been like driving a sword into mud. The reinforcements I have sent will surely stop them, and then where does Manstein go? Yet he could not help but be impressed with what Steiner's troops had done.

The Germans had moved 150 kilometers in 2 days, the men catching any sleep they could get during that marathon march. Pausing to engage 3rd Guards Army in a sharp six-hour battle before rolling out this broad front attack. It was a move akin to Rommel's mad dashes across the Libyan desert in 1942. The General shook his head, determined to put a stop to this enemy counterattack. His own steel chariots were not far off, concentrating at Taranovka about 25 kilometers to the north. Once that concentration was complete, he would be holding a ball of steel that he could fling in any direction, and that decision would determine the outcome of this battle.

Zhukov walked slowly to the nearest signalman. "Notify General Trefimenko of 4th Guards. Tell him his Army is being compressed from two sides, and he should pull back to shorten his line immediately. I want no encirclements."

Zhukov had fast moving mobile units as well, and by nightfall on the 5th of June, 2nd Guards Mech reached and passed through Taranovka in the center of his bridgehead. The Germans had shocked him by marching completely around the massive bulging bridgehead, effecting a linkup with 57th Corps, and now they were attacking towards that same town.

Kuliev's Cavalry shattered against the cold steel of those German tanks, now a disorganized mass that was merely a physical obstacle, and not much of a fighting force. The Germans had been punching through 1st Motor Rifle Corps, but the tough Siberians were counterattacking. Combat took time, he thought, and 25 kilometers is not far for a mechanized force to go. Soon he would be mounting a charge of another kind, not with horsemen and sabres, but with swift moving iron steeds, and wave after wave of tanks.

* * *

The 3rd SS *Totenkopf* hit the line like an iron bolt. Its main attack would fall on the 3rd Guard Tank Corps. On its left, *Grossdeutschland* would surge against the tank brigades of 1st Guards Army, relentless in the attack. Steiner was coming through. The Germans drove through the hamlets of Kofano and Medvedovka, buildings on fire, smoke everywhere. By nightfall they had secured both and pushed another three kilometers, finally taking a brief pause to bring up ammunition to the forward units. There could be no stopping for darkness. Manstein knew he had to ask his men to fight all night again after their long march, and Steiner's hardened veterans were fully prepared to do

so.

But on the German left, Sepp Dietrich had to report he could make no further progress. "I'm fighting the entire 1st Guard Tank Army! They must have 500 tanks here. It's all I can do to hold the line now."

Manstein took the report with the grim realization that his enemy was now simply too strong to sweep off the field as he had done in the past. His men were tired, the battalions worn down, though the armor was holding up well and the reliability of the Lions was superb.

We've pushed them back ten or fifteen kilometers, he thought, but they will not run this time. They simply straighten their lines and reform to the rear. Luftwaffe recon flights show several motorized columns coming south towards Taranovka, so they are also moving units from the Kharkov front to try and stop us.... And they will.

They're going to stop Steiner, and I have nothing else to throw at them. If they do this, it still leaves the road to Poltava very lightly defended. I will have to pull *Das Reich* out of the city and send it that direction now. Dietrich is covering the road to Krasnograd, but how much longer can he hold?

He realized, with a sinking feeling, that his thoughts were now turning to the defense, the image of a grand counterblow to delight Efendi now slowly dissipating like smoke in his mind.

We have hurt them, but they will not give way. They fought for this bridgehead, and now they are going to keep it. The darker implication was now quite apparent to him—the line of the Donets had now been fatally compromised. It was still solid at the base. Hollidt was still well forward of the river between the Oskol and Andreyevka, but the Donets now belonged to the Soviets from that city all the way north to Belgorod.

Kirchner could not take that bridge, but even if he had done so, it would not matter. They have more than adequate supply from the depots they built when they tried to envelop Kharkov from the south. I might have continued this mad dash around the bulge of their bridgehead, and even taken the bridge at Andreyevka, but then what? We would have left four armies on our flank, undefeated, and if I had crossed the river, I would have to drive another 25 kilometers to pose any serious threat to their communications and supplies. And these columns now approaching Taranovka would be converging southeast of Zimyeve instead. We just do not have the strength to do what must be done.

I have been chasing a black cat in a dark room with this maneuver. Now I

fear there *is* no cat.... I must look to the ground between the Donets and Dnieper, for when this battle ends, their next move will try our defense there, either on the road to Poltava, or to Krasnograd.

Those were roads sure to command the attention of generals and fighting men on either side, but not this night. Tonight, there was another road, and one of much greater importance, not for any battle that would be fought along its winding way, but for the silence that would settle over it that night.

“Speidel,” he said, calling his Chief of Staff.

“Sir?”

“Dietrich has been stopped. What is the situation with *Grossdeutschland*?”

“They are still pushing northeast, very near the road to Taranovka.”

“Well, I do not think they can get there on their own,” said Manstein with a shrug as he eyed the location on the map. There was nothing special about the town, other than the fact that a road and rail line met there, kissed briefly, and then ran off on their disparate ways. It was not the beating heart of the northern Ukraine, like the slate grey city of Kharkov that the Russians had been so keen to grasp. No, it was an outlier, one of many small towns in the orbit of that great metropolis. It was a road less traveled....

It was not chosen by Zhukov and his planners when they started their offensive. It just happened to be the center point in the region where the Soviets had achieved their greatest penetration into the German defensive front, and that fact alone made it important, as is any still point at the center of a circle, silently regarding the distant perimeter, and anchoring its radius as it expanded outward.

It *became* important when Kuznetsov chose it as a good place to begin setting up a supply depot. And it became even more important; endowed with a special, yet unspoken significance, when it first entered Manstein’s mind as a target of his counteroffensive. Now it would claim one more laurel, not for the fighting that took place there, for that night it sat in relative calm under the cold, unfeeling sky. No, instead it would join the much more prominent city of Kursk that spring, as a place the Germans could not reach. ‘The Road to Taranovka,’ had become a road to nowhere, and a realization in Manstein’s mind that this war was now a lost cause.

Lost victories, he thought grimly. Twenty kilometers from our line to that place, a distance I could walk on a night like this. But we cannot go there. I cannot take it, and that means much.

“Tell Hörnlein he is to disengage, swing to his left and support Dietrich. We must deal with their 1st Guard Tank Army. There is still a gap that can take them all the way to Poltava, and that is the force they will use to exploit it. I want to hurt them.”

“What about 3rd and 5th SS?”

“Let them keep pushing 4th Guards, particularly any mobile units they are fighting. As for Kirchner, if he thinks he can take Velikaya Bereka, have him do so. Otherwise, he is to break off his attack and move at least one division here, to cover this railhead spur off the line coming up from Lozovaya. Any word from Hausser?”

“He’s pulled *Das Reich* out of the city, and the division is moving to cover the road to Poltava.”

“Well enough. That sector is weak. If he can cut the road between Novaya Vodolaga and Aleksandrovka, all the better. Hausser will know what to do.”

“We’re going on the defensive?”

“Active defense,” said Manstein. “I see no point in trying to push them back over the Donets. We haven’t got the strength in any case.”

“What about Hitler? He most likely expected great things from *Donnerschlag*,” said Speidel.

“I did as well, but there are now at least four armies holding that bridgehead. Pulling Steiner out of the city was the right thing to do. It allowed us to put some credible defense into that gap in the front. So now we will dance with them a while and see whose feet give out first. Tell Hitler we have stopped the enemy advance and restored the front. Tell him anything, but make it sound good.”

“This means Steiner will be on the line,” said Speidel.

“It can’t be helped. Until we get up more infantry, that is where he must stay. The same for Knobelsdorff. We’ve stopped their offensive and restored the front, but it is the best we can do—a stalemate. Hitler will be expecting another miracle, but I don’t have any more tricks in my bag this time around. We need more infantry, and we will need it quickly. The only place I can get it is either from Hansen or from the forces being held for Operation *Untergang*.”

“Does Hitler really think we can go to Leningrad now?” asked Speidel.

“God only knows,” said Manstein. “I think I must pay a visit to OKW, and I’ll be leaving tonight.”

General Sviridov and the 2nd Guard Mech was only 20 kilometers north

of Kirchner's objective, and he would make a night march, getting to the town before Kirchner could push through to take it. Steiner would never get to Teranovka either, not on that day, nor any other. It would become 'The Road Not Taken' for Manstein and the German Army in 1943, and like the final line of that famous poem by Robert Frost, that would make all the difference.

Part IX

Twenty Divisions

*“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure...and one man’s pleasure is
another man’s pain”*

—17th Century Idiom

Chapter 25

“The front has been largely restored,” said Manstein. “Yet there remains one segment, a gap of about 25 kilometers west of Novaya Vodolaga, that is now held by nothing more than a few Panzerjager companies.”

He had flown all that night, and most of the following day to reach OKW headquarters. Keitel knew he was coming, and informed Hitler, but the Führer was in a sour mood. “Have you come all this way to ask for yet another withdrawal?”

Manstein was not pleased with the remark, and his tone clearly communicated that. “When I order a redeployment of forces under my command, and one that might entail a tactical withdrawal, it is done for a sound military reason. You will note that Katukov is not in Akythrya, which is where he would surely be if I had not ordered Kempf’s 4th Army to shorten its lines, and sent Raus to Kharkov. That freed up Steiner, and allowed me to at least contest the expansion of the enemy bridgehead over the Donets. It also freed up 3rd Panzergrenadier Division to reinforce Knobelsdorff, and with four divisions, he was able to stop Katukov. As for Steiner, his Korps now holds a front of 40 kilometers with four divisions, yet his left flank is hanging in thin air, on the road to Krasnograd.”

“Yes, yes, I have heard all your so called military imperatives,” said Hitler, “but when will you drive the enemy back and regain the ground you gave him to make these redeployments? When will you throw him back over the Donets?”

Manstein gave Zeitzler a frustrated look. “I am here, in part, to tell you personally that is no longer possible, at least not with the forces I presently command.”

That brought a moment of uncomfortable silence to all around the map table. Kluge of Armeegruppe Center, waited without saying a word, for he could see that Hitler was very displeased.

“Not possible?”

“Correct,” said Manstein tersely. “You are the supreme commander here. Look at that map. Surely you can see that if Steiner is holding a frontage of 40 kilometers, he cannot concentrate to attack with any real power.”

“Yet you were responsible for these deployments,” said Hitler. “You were the one who dispersed Steiner on such a broad front.”

“Correct again, and that was also necessary. If I had concentrated to a much narrower front, I would have had a stronger attack, but there would have been nothing to hold either flank as Steiner advanced. I will say again—we do not have enough infantry. He would have had to hold the shoulders of any penetration with his own troops, and that would weaken the power of his attack with every kilometer he gained. If we had been facing a single Soviet army, even two, that may not have mattered. But we were facing *four*, and three of those were Guards.”

“I sent you three infantry divisions from Armeegruppe Center,” Hitler reminded him, “and two more from the Caucasus.”

“That is so, and they helped me stabilize the north, but we needed ten, twelve divisions if possible. I discussed this with you at our last meeting, and told you exactly how they could be found.”

“Yes, by giving up everything we have taken from Ivan Volkov,” said Hitler. “That would certainly satisfy him, would it not? Just throw the Caucasus to the wind—is that your sound military advice now?”

“My Führer, I have given you my reasoning on that earlier as well. Astrakhan and Baku cannot be reached, and Groznyy is useless to us for at least a year. The only objective worth holding there is Maykop. At present, Kleist now has twelve infantry and one Panzer division in the Caucasus. If we reduced our position there to simply hold the Kuban, that could be done with six or seven divisions, because we still have the Rumanian 3rd Army available. That frees up six good German divisions that could be used to hold that enemy bridgehead over the Donets, and then I could pull Steiner off the line, concentrate, and plan a real counterattack. *Donnerschlag* was a surprise move that caught the enemy off guard, and it worked as planned. Unfortunately, we discovered they had moved four armies into that bridgehead—four armies. Steiner’s troops have performed in an exemplary manner, but three divisions cannot move an enemy force of that size.”

Hitler fidgeted, his lips pursed, eyes shifting about, clearly ill at ease. He could hear the logic of what Manstein was saying, but it was something he did not want to accept. Steiner had been stopped. His enemy had taken ground from him, and Manstein was telling him it could not be regained—not without relinquishing yet more ground taken in the Caucasus, terrain that led him to the oil wells of Groznyy and Baku. Then Manstein riveted home his

point by other means.

“I must point out again that if our positions between Kharkov and Izyum are not strengthened, and very soon, then you risk that entire flank. It will compel Paulus to withdraw his 6th Army and yield the entire Donets Basin. Otherwise he will be cut off, along with everything in the Caucasus. So, you must now choose what is most essential. We either relinquish the Terek Region, and fall back on Maykop as I suggest, or you will soon see us struggling to save the Donets Basin. I have stopped them, but they will reorganize. We must do the same before they renew offensive operations. You must do this now, or find some other means of reinforcing Armeegruppe South. Half measures will no longer suffice.”

“All my Generals want more divisions,” said Hitler. “You must understand that this is not the only front needing reinforcement. General Kluge tells me he cannot advance on Orel because he has already sent so many divisions to your command. General Kuchler of Armeegruppe North tells me he cannot launch Operation *Untergang* until all the units *he* has given up are returned. And you must also remember that Italy is now a weak sister, and I must provide for the possibility of Allied operations against the Balkans, Greece, or Italy.”

“I have already told you how Italy can be reinforced,” said Manstein. “Kübler should be moved out of Syria, and Guderian should also destroy Baba Gurgur and leave Iraq.”

“These things have been under consideration,” said Hitler, “but the movement of forces takes time.”

“Correct me if I am wrong, but has this redeployment even been ordered? Equivocation and procrastination will not serve us now. We need your decisive leadership, timely orders. Otherwise the enemy steals a march on us while we take things ‘under consideration.’ Which brings us to one last point of discussion, and the real reason I came here today. I must tell you, and I believe that both General Kluge and Zeitzler here are in agreement, that until we stabilize the Southern wing of the army, Operation *Untergang* is completely out of the question. If you cannot now find troops to save the Donets Basin, then you will most certainly not find them to bring Operation *Untergang* up to its planned strength before the July 1st launch date. It must either be postponed, or cancelled.”

Hitler had taken one barrage after another, the towers and walls of his fortress collapsing with each passing minute. Now he simply closed his eyes

and began speaking, as if to himself more than anyone in the room, and with each word he uttered, his tone grew harder, darker, until his famous anger sallied forth in his defense.

“Cancelled... cancelled. My Field Marshal is oh so fond of cancelling offensives. He had the temerity to suspend Operation *Zitadelle*, and now he tells me I must cancel *Untergang* as well! Then I must return the Terek to Ivan Volkov, and all to serve his defense of Armeegruppe South! There are 30 infantry divisions in Armeegruppe North, along with six mobile divisions. That should be more than enough to crush enemy resistance, and do the job. That operation will *not* be cancelled, nor will it be postponed! You will return to your command and fight! *Fight!*”

The Führer struggled to compose himself, brushing the hair from his white brow. “The time for all these clever ‘Operations’ is long past. This situation simply requires backbone—staying power. It can be mastered and this army has the means. I am tired of hearing one excuse after another as to why things cannot be done and why we must give the enemy back everything we have taken from him. Very well... I will get you the infantry you request, because I have already taken the decision to leave the Syrian desert behind. Do not think I idle away my days and hours, Herr Manstein. I have more on my mind than you can possibly imagine. So, I am done with deserts, and fruitless promises, and adventures in the Middle East. I have already recalled the Brandenburg Division, Guderian and Kübler will also be recalled. Cyprus will be evacuated and the troops there sent to Rhodes. All the mountain and Jäger divisions will be distributed between Italy, Greece and the Balkans. All the regular infantry divisions and the Panzers, will be moved to the Dnieper depots and prepare for service as required. This will include both 2nd and 16th Panzer Divisions in Hube’s Korps, and 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions from Iraq. The Brandenburgers will be sent to Germany to refit as a Panzer Division again.”

Hitler had been leaning on the map table with both hands, staring at the dents and bulges in the front, his eyes unmoving. Now he stood up, clasping his hands behind his back, and staring at Manstein.

“There,” he said sharply. “The decision has been made, and it will not be questioned. The turkey is on the table, and I will now leave the three of you to decide how to carve it up. I use such a metaphor for good reason, for that is what I have had to sacrifice to clean up the mess on the southern front. Turkey! This movement out of Iraq and Syria will have political

ramifications. It exposes Turkey's southern border to the enemy, and it could weaken the resolve of the Turks to remain neutral. Churchill and Roosevelt have been pressuring the Turks to close their borders and cut our supplies to Syria and Iraq. Now they will begin courting favors, but there must be no movement of British forces through Turkey. All the key rail depots and bridges the Todt Organizations built will be destroyed as we evacuate. We will no longer need those rail lines, but neither will we leave them for the enemy to use. It is a moot issue now. Operation *Phoenix* , as well as *Eisenfall* have been cancelled. Plan Orient is dead. As for *Untergang* , that operation will not be cancelled, and it will proceed as scheduled on July 1st."

The three Generals took all this in, surprised that Hitler would make such sweeping changes all at once. He had invested all his energy and hopes for some great economic boon to come out of his Middle East adventures, but they knew changes were in order once the Führer recalled Rommel from Syria. The defeat in Tunisia changed everything, and now Hitler was closing his ranks, and looking for a certain and sure set of borders that he could defend. He was not going to defeat the British in Syria and Iraq, and had finally come to see that he had weakened the *Ostfront* entirely too much to pursue those distant objectives, just as he had done so in North Africa. The ill-fated Operation *Zitadelle* , suspended before it could truly prove itself, still festered. He wanted no more excuses. Then he turned to Manstein, his manner softening.

"What you have done in restoring the front has not gone unnoticed."

At first, Manstein did not know quite how to take that. Was Hitler praising him, or suggesting that he was aware that he had done things the Führer did not approve.

"I understand fully what you have said concerning that bridgehead. If the enemy has reinforced it so heavily, then we must do the same if we are to have any chance of throwing him back. You may have the pick of the litter when these forces reach the Dnieper, but I will expect results. When you return to the front, tell Steiner that I am very pleased with his performance, and that of all his troops. As for the decision regarding the Caucasus, the Mykop-Tuapse pipeline is the only thing that matters now south of the Don, and the Army will stay where it is to give us a strong buffer zone to defend. Keep a wary eye on Volkov, Herr General. He may seem weak now, but he will do everything possible to take his revenge upon us. Be wary."

With that, Hitler turned and walked slowly toward the door, the guards

stiffening to salute as he passed. Manstein watched him go, a plaintive figure in so many ways. He could see the disappointment in his eyes, the reluctance to yield anything, the irrational logic fed by his stubborn will.

“Well,” he said, when Hitler had departed, “I did not get quite the decision I wanted, but this will have to do. He has given up on Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in one throw, but yet he will not budge on the Caucasus.”

“The Turks weren’t shooting at him,” said Zeitzler. “But that cannot be said for Volkov.”

“How many divisions does this free up?” asked Kluge.

“Twenty,” said Zeitzler, a light in his eyes like a man finding gold. There was a noticeable relief among them all, as if all the tension in the room had oozed away in the wake of the Führer.

“Twenty divisions,” said Manstein. “And four of them good Panzer Divisions. As the Führer was kind enough to give me first pick, I choose 3rd Panzerkorps, if only because it is closer in Syria than the 47th is in Baghdad. Hube will come in vary handy if I bring him up on the southern shoulder of this bridgehead. But I also need infantry. How many line divisions are there?”

“Six,” said Zeitzler. “You will want to split them in two, but may I suggest the following disposition? You take Hube as you wish, and then 47th Panzerkorps will go to Kluge with 3rd and 4th Panzer. Take any three line-infantry for your front, General Manstein, and the remaining three will go into OKW Reserve to be used when most needed. Let us send Kübler to Italy with the 1st, 3rd, and 5th Mountain Divisions, along with the two Fallschirmjager Divisions in Student’s command. I would like to place 6th Mountain Division in the Crimea—a nice cupboard to tuck it away, while keeping it close to both the Caucasus and the Donets Basin. The SS Prinz Eugen and the 104th Jager Divisions can go back to anti-partisan duty in Serbia and Croatia. As for Cyprus, it will be hanging out like a sore thumb, so let us put the 78th Sturm there.”

“We should evacuate that island,” said Kluge.

“Perhaps, but it has useful aerodromes that allow us to cover Northern Syria. If the British do get any notion of advancing to that frontier, we at least have some foil with the Luftwaffe.”

“You might think so,” said Manstein, “but we did not have air superiority in either Syria or Iraq, so if the British do cut a deal with Turkey, nothing we have on Cyprus will impede them. I see it as nothing more than another

liability, tying up a good infantry division or two with garrison duty. See if you can work on that with Hitler.”

“Very well,” said Zeitzler. “Then the 78th goes to either Rhodes or Crete. Both those islands shield Greece, and Hitler is quite nervous about a British move into the Balkans.”

“He should not worry. The British will not invade the Balkans. To do so, they would first need to reduce Crete and Rhodes, then invade and occupy Greece.”

“Yet what if Turkey was as gracious to Churchill as he was to us? Can you imagine them gaining free passage through Turkey, and then lining up their forces on the Turkish border to invade Bulgaria?”

“It will never happen,” said Manstein. “You heard the Führer. We will wreck those rail lines and it would take them months to rebuild a logistical network through Turkey. Besides, even if they were on the Turkish border, it would be a year before they became a threat to us.”

“They could move up the Black Sea Coast and be behind our Dnieper line,” said Zeitzler.

“Well, they’ll be quite late. It’s 600 miles from the Turkish border to the Dnieper. At this moment, the Soviets are only 90 miles from that objective. Which army do you think will get there first?”

“A good point,” said Zeitzler. “Yet suppose the Allies go for Vienna instead? The Russians are 900 miles from there at this moment. The Turkish frontier is only 660 miles.”

“Let us wait and see where the Soviets are by the time the British are marching through Istanbul,” said Manstein with a grin.

That ended the discussion concerning the Balkans.

“I think we have only assigned 19 divisions,” said Manstein, going over the list in his head again.

“Very astute,” said Zeitzler. “Not counting the Brandenburgers, we are still left with 10th Motorized from Iraq. I would like to hold on to that one as well. There are any number of places where it might be useful.”

“Is it converting to a Panzergrenadier Division?”

“Not yet. There is still something to be said for a good fast infantry division. We’ll leave it that way, but find some Panzerjagers to give it some defense against armor.”

“How long will 24th Panzerkorps be away?”

“Perhaps a month. The 24th Division is in fairly good shape, the 22nd

practically wrecked. The 23rd is in the middle, both numerically and in terms of its overall condition.”

“It will at least be good to know that we have all three in Germany,” said Manstein, “because we will need them sooner than we think.”

“Indeed. Then we have covered everything,” said Zeitzler. “The only card left unplayed in this hand is the Brandenburg Division, and the Führer will undoubtedly keep it close to his chest. I realize that you get only two divisions, General Kluge, but at the moment, the crisis is in the south. Is this agreeable?”

“I have no objection,” said Kluge. “I am sure that the Field Marshal will remember my generosity should I ever need him.”

“I will indeed,” said Manstein. “And I also see that we have left nothing for *Untergang* —all the better. Do you really think the Führer means to launch this offensive? These five extra divisions will come in very handy on my front, but they will be barely enough to hold the line and allow me to build a mobile reserve. Ivan has tried us twice, and he still wants Kharkov. He is already at the front door, and knocking loudly.”

“Yes, unfortunately, Hitler means to attack towards Leningrad,” said Zeitzler. “He has plenty of infantry, but those six mobile divisions will not get him very far. Three of them are old motorized infantry divisions converted to Panzergrenadiers. However, there are divisions refitting in Germany, notably the 24th Panzer Korps, and they will most likely be committed to this attack. Then he has that hodge-podge that Himmler scraped together. How has the Nordland Division performed?”

“It is a stubborn defender,” said Manstein, “but lacks the skill necessary to make it a good offensive division.”

“Well, Himmler may come calling for it before July. Keep that in mind. He wanted it as part of his new SS Korps for *Untergang*, and I think he has delusions of seeing it lead the way to Leningrad.”

“Zeitzler,” said the Field Marshal, “if you can drag your feet on this ill-conceived plan, I suggest you do so. The Soviets will have multiple lines of defense waiting for that offensive.”

“Possibly,” said Zeitzler. “It may end up a lot of percussion without any real music. I certainly don’t think it will get very far, but perhaps that is what the Führer needs to make him understand the seriousness of our situation on this front. How did we get here, gentlemen? Eighteen months ago, we were burning Moscow!”

“I think Beria started that fire,” said Manstein. “At least this is what I have learned. And I think if Hitler tries to light another one in Leningrad, he will be courting more than a rude awakening. The Soviets will be waiting for him, and after they stop him, don’t think they will just sit and congratulate themselves. If these offensives toward Kharkov teach us anything, then we had better learn the lesson, and the Führer had better learn it as well if he wants to be the head “School Master.”

Chapter 26

Montgomery would lose the argument surrounding his Sicily invasion, but win one small consolation prize concerning Malta. The fact that Churchill still endowed it with a position of great importance for the future security of British interests in the Med, made its capture a foregone conclusion. Britain had reclaimed the Rock of Gibraltar, and now she would reclaim Malta as well.

The enemy garrison was not strong. Even the Luftwaffe had been withdrawing most of its key air assets to Sicily, leaving long range recon, and a few fighter squadrons on the island. Two battalions of the San Marco Marines held the place, with a battalion of the Folgore Parachute Brigade, and the Italians had more planes there than the Germans, until the Allies began visiting the fields with daily fighter sweeps. The RAF was working hard to neutralize that outpost as a viable air base for the Axis, and then hammering key installations on Sicily daily as well, particularly the fields near Gerbini, Lentini, Palermo and Sigonella near Catania.

These attacks would also further the notion that Sicily was to be the next target of the Allies war effort, and as German troops began to make a steady withdrawal from first Iran, and then Syria, Churchill heaved a sigh of great relief. He had sweat blood to build a defense in both theaters, and now all that effort left a pool of seasoned divisions in the Middle East, forces that he could put to many uses in his mind.

The Prime Minister was still looking for some consideration of an attack into Greece and the Balkans, and he was also actively trying to reopen diplomatic channels with Turkey. In spite of that, Marshall, and the American Joint Chiefs, could see no reason why any concerted effort should be made there, and considered it a waste of both time and resources. They continued to press for an invasion of northern France in 1943, though Marshall conceded that removing Italy from the Enemy camp and restoring control of the entire Mediterranean Sea to the Allies was desirable, but he wanted action soon, and waiting another month to clear both Pantelleria and Malta before attacking Sicily would push that start date into July or even August.

Sardinia was not considered as great a strategic prize as Sicily, or an invasion of Southern Italy itself. In fact, Churchill once remarked that the

former would be a “glorious campaign” and the latter a mere convenience.” Yet Sardinia could be invaded for half the cost in men and material, and once occupied, it presented the Allies with a good base to support an immediate attack on Rome. He did not see that coming from the *Husky* Operation for many long months. In this he was quite correct, for in the real history, Sicily was not cleared until mid-August, the landing at Salerno was staged on September 9, Naples entered on October 1, the Anzio landings staged January 22 of 1944, and Rome was not entered until June of that year. That was a long year from June of 1943 to June of 1944 before Rome was in hand, and Marshall believed the road through Sardinia would get there much sooner.

And so it was decided—Operation *Brimstone* would be the next Allied Offensive in the Med. While *Husky* was a major operation planning to lift eight divisions to Sicily, the attack on Sardinia would require only half that force. The actual draft plan, as developed by the Allies in the real history, (but not implemented) is presented here (in part) just as it was written.

OUTLINE PLAN FOR THE SEIZURE OF SARDINIA

I) OBJECTIVE:

To seize and hold SARDINIA.

a.

To conduct an air offensive from NORTH AFRICA in order to re

b.

To gain beachheads on the west and southwest coasts of the I

c.

To capture landing fields in the ORISTANO-VILLACIDRO-IGLESIA

d.

d. To advance overland to capture CAGLIARI and the sur-rour
e.

To secure CAGLIARI from a counterattack from the northeast t
f.

To reduce the remainder of the Island in the following order

Advance to the line OROSEI-NUORO-MACOMER-BOSA MARINA. Occupy

g.

To consolidate the Island against counterattack by sea or air.

To occupy CORSICA, or to neutralize the offensive capability

II) MAJOR FORCES REQUIRED.

a. Ground:

4 Infantry Divisions
2 Armored Combat Teams
2 Parachute Regiments.

b. Air:

7 Fighter Groups
6 Bomb Groups.

c. Naval:

3 BB, 3 CV, 6 ACV, 10 CA & CL 44 DD
15 ss

4. Availability.

All forces and shipping required should be available in the area.

d. Probable AXIS strength to be encountered.

The last intelligence estimate (May 3, 1943) of forces (all Italian)
NOTE: If the garrison of SARDINIA is appreciably reinforced, the

* * *

Monty took the stage again for an encore, but this time the main plan had been devised, and he was briefing Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley. The original plan had been cancelled, and so to ease the sting, he was given a new plan.

"Being half as big as the Husky Operation," he began, "*Brimstone* can be mounted twice as fast. So instead of waiting for Malta and Sicily, we can go straight for Rome. Our Spitfires have the range for that," said Tedder, "and the range is indeed, " said Montgomery. "It won't be quite as good as using the *Bomb*. Let's hope that won't be necessary," said Eisenhower. "Marshalls operation, and *Brimstone* just seemed so much cleaner."

"Well," said Montgomery, "*Brimstone*

is the plan. While it will need carriers for close air support a

"The landward side?" said Patton. "Well where do we land?"

"The primary beaches would be to the northwest at the Gulf of

"What about Sassari in the North?"

"It will be a secondary objective," said Montgomery. "The airf

"Well why don't we give it to Matt Ridgeway and the 82nd Airbo

"We may have a role for Ridgeway," said Eisenhower, "but let's

"I'm afraid we now suffer from an embarrassment of riches," sa

"Don't worry," said Eisenhower. "Marshall wants seven division

"Actually, I think we'll have a go at Ceylon," said Monty. "Ru

"Sounds like a hell of a team," said Patton."

"Indeed," said Monty. "Then we'll be using your three Ranger B

"Alright," said Patton. "Where do I land?"

"You've got the bay off Gonessa in the southwest. Then you mov

"So we get the prize," Patton smiled, liking the fact that he

"That's the principle port on the island," said Montgomery. "W

"Germans? I thought this was an Italian show?"

"There's been an intelligence update," said Eisenhower. "The G

"The more the merrier," said Patton. "I kicked those bastards

"Now then," said Montgomery. "Once Cagliari is secured, we'll

"So we get the east coast... There are no good roads there at al

"Nothing we haven't encountered before," said Montgomery.

"You won't hook right until you take Sassari?"

"Well, by the time I get up there, I should also have 1st Cana

"So we mop up the loose ends, while you get the glory."

"Come now, General Patton, if it's glory you're after, I'm sur

"Of course," said Patton, with a narrow-eyed look. After the b

"Look Ike," he began. "I can understand why you threw a bone t

plan right out from under him. But it rankles me to think he'll

"You'll get through," said Eisenhower. "That's why we picked y

"Damn right I will," said Patton, blowing off steam. "I'll tel

Eisenhower gave him that famous grin.

Chapter 27

Darby's Rangers had the honor of the first units to hit the coast of Sardinia. Arriving before dawn on the 15th of June, they deployed from fast APD type destroyers at the small harbor of Porto Botte, about 25 kilometers southeast of Patton's main landing site. 1st and 2nd Ranger Battalions stormed that port to find the only defense there was from the relatively weak Sardagena MG Battalion. Before sunrise, they had the port, and chased the enemy another 5 klicks inland. In those hours, it was all their war, the only troops from the Western Alliance engaged with the enemy in the entire theater.

The 4th Rangers came in on the island of San Antioch, landing at Calsetta on the northwest tip, and finding nothing there but a ten-man constabulary, which was eager to switch sides the minute they saw the tough American Rangers. They then marched another seven kilometers, all the way across the island to another small fishing port at San Antioco. All the way, they were followed by villagers, local farmers, and the girls blowing kisses and handing them flowers, fruit and fresh milk. They were the first Allied troops to liberate European soil, and if the rest of the journey was going to be anything like this, the Rangers thought they'd be in Berlin by Christmas.

Further north, the battleship *Texas* was starting to pound the beaches west of Gonessa, and with those first heavy salvos, telephones started ringing all over the island. The enemy had been caught by surprise. Even though they had taken the precaution of reinforcing both Corsica and Sardinia with two reconstituted German Divisions (90th Panzergrenadier and 15th Infantry) they did not expect the Allies to attack where they did.

Montgomery's planned operations against Pantelleria and Malta were only now being mounted, with Cunningham's Eastern Med Squadron covering those assaults. A good many German aircraft were off to the south, or transferred to Sicily, and they were now racing to get the newly rebuilt Hermann Goring Division south through Naples to cross the Strait of Messina in the next few days. [3]_The only German troops already on Sicily were largely Luftwaffe units, service troops, and March battalions that were being organized by Colonel Ernst-Guenther Baade. Originally meant to be

reinforcements for Tunisia, they were now being stitched together into “Panzergrenadier Regiment Palermo.” Baade then began to gather up flak units with their powerful 88mm guns to roll them into the new “Division *Sizilien* ,” which would later be renamed the 15th Panzergrenadier Division after its famous older brother, the 15th Panzer that had perished in Tunis.

Colonel Baade was a very competent man, a veteran of the fighting in North Africa where he had served with Rommel’s 15th Panzer. He was cool, professional, and brave under fire, yet always treated his enemies fairly if his unit took prisoners. There was both an art and a code that applied to war, and Baade embodied them both. He fought at Bir Hachim, Tobruk, and Rommel’s Gazala line. Now he was sent to build something from nothing on Sicily, and that was exactly what he was doing.

He found that a number of veteran officers had escaped the debacle in Tunisia. Lieutenant Colonel Karl Ens was the first on his list, a good fighting officer with the 104th Panzergrenadiers before a battle wound saw him evacuated. Then he found Colonel Theodor Koerner off the 115th Panzergrenadier Regiment, and Lieutenant Colonel Fritz Fullriede of the 129th Panzergrenadiers. All three would now lead Kampfgruppen Baade was slowly building on Sicily.

Like this unit, Major General Carl-Hans Lungerhausen had been tapped to rebuild the old 90th Light Afrika Division that had served under Rommel, and it was to be assigned to Sardinia. While Herman Goring and 15th Panzergrenadiers would form the heart of the Sicily garrison, Sardinia was supposed to get both 15th Infantry and the 90th Light, now also being rebuilt as a Panzergrenadier Division by Lungerhausen. While the 90th was waiting for its transport, the 15th Division went ahead by ship from Toulon, a patchwork of ex-north Africa vets, men recuperating from service on the *Ostfront* , and new recruits. Its presence on Sardinia was therefore part of the altered history of these events, and it had only just arrived there.

Corsica was to have been garrisoned by the *Reichsführer* Division, but it was now far away in Russia, holding the line just outside the city of Kharkov. So there was nothing for Corsica, which led Kesselring to decide to move the 90th there as a first stop on June 10th. “If we need more than the 15th on Sardinia, we can always move the 90th over the Bonifacio strait,” he told the new commander on Sardinia, General Frido von Senger und Etterlin.

While this was going on, Erwin Rommel had been called to see Hitler again in Berlin where he was tasked with building the units that would be

needed for the defense of Italy.

“I have had to send a part of your old command in Syria to Manstein,” Hitler told him. “But all of Kübler’s Mountain troops are there, and you may find units rebuilding in France as well, including your old favorite, the 7th Panzer.”

“I was very glad to see that most of the key personnel from that division were safely evacuated from Tunisia,” said Rommel. “What am I to do with this new Army?”

“We have a plan,” said Hitler. “I am calling it Operation Alarich—the occupation of Italy by strong German forces in the event that the Italians begin to waver. Kübler has five mountain Divisions. The SS will go to Serbia, but the others go to Italy. We must be ready to move decisively to disarm the Italian forces in Italy and seize control. Believe me, this is no small order. Manstein has been hounding me for more divisions, and I have been forced to heavily reinforce Armeegruppe South. Guderian is being recalled for that, and now you must find troops for Italy for me. You will also have Student’s two Parachute Divisions, and anything else you can find in France—except SS formations being built there by Himmler.”

Within 45 Days, the Germans would move 17 Divisions into Italy in the real history, and now, with Hitler’s fears made real with the news being shouted over those telephone lines on Sardinia, Rommel would have to move with decisive quickness to build a force capable of undertaking the task of controlling Italy.

“Am I to command there?” he asked.

“Kesselring is already there, and he has very good relations with the Italians. So for the moment, he will retain command. As you know, the Italians are not entirely fond of you.”

“Nor I of them,” said Rommel.

“You see? Then politically, it is better that Kesselring retains command, but you will build his army as Inspector General of the Wehrmacht, and you will retain command of all other units in France, the Low Countries, Denmark and Norway, including the entire 15th Army. That is where the real threat will be looming—in the Pas de Calais.”

“Yet most everything the British and Americans have now is right here in the Mediterranean or Middle East. That was one after effect of your Operation *Phoenix* .”

“It is likely that most of those divisions will be withdrawn to England,”

said Hitler. "I believe their immediate concern is in knocking Italy out of the war and keeping us tied down in the Balkans. In time, they will turn their eyes to France. As for Mussolini, I believe I still have his loyalty, and that of many of the Italian divisions, particularly those with good Fascist seed. Yet Italy is a problem, which is why we must be prepared to act."

Rommel shrugged, but nodded his ascent. He would build the army that would fight in Italy, just like his former subordinates had been busy building the divisions that would fight on Sicily and Sardinia, but he would not command. Yet Hitler took advantage of this meeting to ask what Rommel thought about the prospects for defending Italy.

"The Allies will invade soon," said Rommel, "and they will go for the outer islands first, Sicily and Sardinia. After that, they will follow with a landing on the Italian mainland. If they are smart, they will land north of Rome, and in that event, they will outflank anything we have in the south. But the north can be held—the resources of the rich Po Valley—particularly if a strong defensive position is prepared and manned by good German divisions before the enemy arrives. I would make that my principle strategy for Italy, a stone wall through the mountains in the north. Trying to hold the center and south exposes those forces to endless opportunities for seaborne flanking maneuvers. Fight there only to delay and buy time for this strong defensive front to be completed in the north."

"This is what I believe as well," said Hitler, pleased that for once, he had a General that agreed with him. "Kesselring is of a different mind. He thinks the center and south can be held, but with mobile forces capable of reacting to any contingency, and tenacious infantry. Where would you build your defensive front?"

"Along these mountains," said Rommel, indicating the position on the map, "the Apennine Range. Anchor it just south of La Spezia in the west, and follow the mountains all the way south and east to Pesaro on the Adriatic. Place our reserves in the east, near Ravenna."

"A very good plan," said Hitler. "I want you to select the divisions and supervise the building of this defensive front, and for that purpose, I will empower you with command of all divisions north of Rome. At the appropriate time, you are to seize all passes, key bridges, rail depots and other major roads in the north, and disarm any Italian units you can find. Kesselring is adamant that we should hold the south as well, and he has been organizing the initial defense there. He is convinced that the Allies will

invade Sicily, but tells me he can delay them there for two months if they do so. Then he proposes delaying actions in the south, and successive lines of defense on the narrow waist of the peninsula between Naples and Termoli on the Adriatic. He would even want to defend Rome.”

“That would be useless,” said Rommel, “and in some ways, it would be criminal. Do you realize the artistic legacy of that city? You are a man who understands culture, my Führer. Do not send your panzers into the narrow streets of Rome and destroy all that history and artwork.”

“If I do choose to hold it, the Allies will be responsible if they attack us there.” Hitler had an unlimited capacity to shift the blame. “Yet at this time, I am inclined to withdraw all our forces north of Rome should Italy betray us. Very well... Go to Munich and establish a special headquarters there to plan this defensive front and complete your other tasks. You will be very well occupied in that.”

In war, as in life, way leads on to way. Rommel would soon find that he had more to do than select divisions and build fortifications, for Churchill was still burning oil in his planning lamps for a Mediterranean strategy, and he was enlisting the support of Sir Alan Brooke to be his ambassador. What that would become was as yet part of the unformed mist of the future, something that not even Anton Fedorov could have predicted. Just as Rommel was picking up his gloves to depart, a runner came to the conference room, eyes alight with alarm.

The Allies were invading Sardinia.

* * *

In the first hours of an invasion from the sea, confusion is as much a factor in the outcome as anything else. News of the fighting on the coast told von Senger where the enemy had attacked, but nothing of where else he might appear. The entire western coast of the island was a potential target, and with only one good German division at hand, he had to be very prudent as to how he would commit this force to the battle.

The Gulf of Oristano had been considered a probable target if Sardinia was to be invaded, which was why the bulk of the Italian Bari division had been garrisoned there. Yet Monty was going to hit the beaches with two veteran British Divisions supported by a full armored brigade, and the Bari Division was not going to stop him.

At the same time, a small airborne drop had been planned north of Oristano, conducted by Colonel John Frost, now elevated to command the 1st British Para Brigade for his defense against the Wiking Division in Syria. The main airfield in the region was very near the city, but there was also a small secondary strip at Milis, about seven kilometers to the north.

The first two battalions landed, though they were fairly well scattered in the dark, but the 3rd Battalion got off to a late start with mechanical problems in the lead plane. By the time it reached the coast, it was nearing dawn, and German fighters became a real problem, forcing the mission to abort. So Frost proceeded with two battalions, finding no German units at the airfield, and only a small force of Italian military police. Like Darby in the south, he would have his objective secured just after sunrise, but he would not keep it for very long.

Other special operations saw British Commandos landing on the southern cape framing the bay to get after Italian shore batteries there, and the Royal Marines landed 15 kilometers to the south, where they were to destroy another coastal gun position at Torre Cosari.

In Patton's sector, he would soon realize that most of the available assault boat shipping had been claimed by Montgomery as well. There was only enough left over for Patton to land the infantry of two regiments in Terry Allen's 1st Infantry, and two battalions of TF Abrams. Most of the artillery had to wait for the second wave later in the day. Patton steamed at his situation.

Monty had told him that his maneuver south would cut the main roads and force any enemy troops to use the less developed roads on the east coast—the very same roads Patton would have to use himself to get up north. From his position at Oristano Bay, Monty also had a 50-kilometer lead on him in the race to La Maddalena, but it was still one that the fiery American General wanted to win.

Very little moved that morning on the Axis side. Von Senger gave orders for 15th Infantry Division to prepare to move south, for it had only arrived on the island a few days earlier, and was concentrated in the north near La Maddalena and Sassari. The Bari Division rushed to man defenses at Oristano and the Sabuda Division sent three battalions up the road to Iglesias to face the wrath of George Patton. When von Senger reported to Kesselring, the Field Marshal was shocked that the Allies had moved so quickly after Tunis, and surprised they had selected Sardinia.

“We thought they would need at least another month before they could move,” he said. “How many divisions?”

“Two at Oristano Bay, both British, and one reinforced American division further south on the beaches west of Iglesias. Do you want me to order the 15th Infantry to Oristano?”

“They want to cut off Cagliari,” said Kesselring. Yes, get to Oristano. The 90th has just arrived on Corsica, but I will move it to Bonifacio and get Siebel ferries there to cross the Strait. We must delay them as long as possible. Try and prevent any major movement north until the 90th Division arrives.”

Kesselring also had a whole series of other questions on his mind now. What was he to do with Sicily? There was only one German division there now, the 15th Panzergrenadier, but should he move Goring’s division there as originally planned?

Sardinia, he thought. What in God’s name do they want that for? It was clearly reachable from their western ports and airfields at Bizerte and Tunis, but Sicily was the greater prize. The big question now is the Italians. Will they fight? If we can win on Sardinia, I think that would be decided favorably. But if the Allies make a quick victory there, then Italy’s position is fatally compromised. The enemy will be holding a knife at Mussolini’s throat. They could jump directly to the vicinity of Rome.

Yet not until they clear Sicily. Yes... Cagliari is the only decent port on Sardinia, and if I keep Palermo, and concentrate my air power there and at Trapani, then I can possibly neutralize Cagliari as a debarkation port for any move against the Italian mainland. This will force them to use La Maddalena as their main anchorage, and for that, they will have to clear us off Corsica. Let me see about getting another division there from Southern France.

Do they think we will simply withdraw from Sicily now? That won’t happen if I have anything to say about it, and at the moment, I am *Oberbefehlshaber Süd*, commander of all forces in Southern Italy. Rommel has wormed his way into Hitler’s good graces, and he has been given responsibility for the north, which is where he wants to build our primary defensive line. But I could fight them in Italy for months—for a year or longer if necessary. We should fight for everything in the south, Taranto, the big airfields at Foggia, and certainly Naples. That is where the Herman Goring Division goes—Naples. From there it can get to Messina on Sicily easily if the Allies do plan a landing there.

So, the next game has finally begun, and I must play out the opening very carefully.

Part X

Collapse

“The proud German army by its sudden collapse, sudden crumbling and breaking up, has once again proved the truth of the saying 'The Hun is always either at your throat or at your feet.'”

—Winston Churchill

Chapter 28

Von Senger waited for darkness on the night of the 15th, but he had spent the entire day mustering all the rolling stock he could find and getting 15th Infantry to the rail yards. He would get a train south, as far as the town of Bauladu, about 15 kilometers north of Oristano, before he then encountered fallen trees piled over the line, with the tracks beyond torn up.

Colonel John Frost and his men had been busy that night as well. The Germans found no sign of the British paratroopers there, but they were forced to dismount and deploy. Von Senger knew the paras had taken the airfield at Milis, and he was going to take it back. He learned that the 152nd CCNN Battalion had already moved there, and was skirmishing with the paras north of the field. Now he would bring a little more persuasion to that argument, ordering Bushchenhagen to take the field, and then deploy his division for a counterattack towards Oristano.

He would bring the bulk of his division south, detaching one battalion in the north to reinforce the small port of Algheru on the west coast, and leaving one more at Puerto Torres north of Sassari. As for Cagliari, nothing more could get through there, so the best he could do was order the defenders to hold out as long as possible.

Bushchenhagen set up his headquarters in the larger town of Abbasanta, astride the main road and rail line north. Led by the Recon Battalion, he organized an immediate counterattack towards Milis, but ran into John Frost and his intrepid paras, well dug in and ready to fight just south of Bauladu. He knew the enemy was simply trying to delay his advance, for the weight of his division would surely prevail in time. But that time was expensive. He needed to get south as quickly as possible, for reports coming out of Oristano were not good. The Bari Division was still fighting in the city with the Division HQ and a single stubborn battalion, but the British had taken the segments of the city closest to the beaches, and flanked it to the west.

Further south, Terry Allan's 1st Infantry was ashore and well established by noon the first day, and he hit four battalions forming a defensive front at mid-day, driving them back. Late in the day, Patton hustled more tanks from TF Abrams ashore, and he wanted to bulldoze his way inland as soon as possible. He would do exactly that, seizing Gonessa, a little over seven clicks

inland, and then horse whipping his tanks onward until they reached the outskirts of Iglesias near dusk on the 16th of June. He would take that city with a night attack on the 16th. With all his initial landing objectives secured, Patton now began to organize for his drive east to Cagliari, but he would have competition.

Tanks and armored engineers of the 1st Tank Brigade had pushed inland quickly from the beaches, reaching the main road south and pushing off in that direction. They were supported by infantry from the 5th Division, and now the first footrace between Patton and Montgomery was underway. Who would take Cagliari?

Kesselring was watching the progress of the battle with some concern. The Allied plan was very good. The landing at Oristano Bay was strong enough to overpower the Bari Division before the 15th Infantry could arrive. Frost's gallant defense, retiring from one prepared position to another as he fell back on the airfield at Milis, had delayed just long enough for Montgomery to push the last of the stubborn Italian defenders out of Oristano. The British were now assaulting the airfield there, though it had already been abandoned.

That was the real value of Southern Sardinia. The airfield at Oristano, and those at Villacidro, Decimomannu, Elmas and Monserato were among the very best on the island. They had been used to throw German and Italian planes into the Sicilian Narrows to harass and attack Allied Shipping, and their loss would be keenly felt. Soon it would be necessary to order those fields to be evacuated, reducing his air presence in the approaches to the Sicilian Narrows by 50%.

15th Infantry finally pushed Frost out of Milis, retaking that field after dusk on the 16th. That same night, as Frost was setting up defensive positions south of the field, the 7th Gordons came up, and they were a most welcome sight.

"Jolly good," said the Colonel of the 7th when he found Frost. "We'll take over here. Monty wants you down south at the Oristano Field. Get some rest if you can, because I think they're bringing in transports with the first fighter group."

That night, Patton pushed to the rail town of Musei, 25 kilometers inland from his beachhead, and the British had moved south to attack retreating elements of the Bari Division southeast of Oristano at San Gavino and Sardara. That was only ten clicks north of the big airfield at Villacidro, and

the Germans sent orders to fly off any remaining squadrons there to alternate fields.

Monty had to make a decision as to his floating reserve. Rather than wait for Cagliari to be taken, which could take several days, he decided his beachheads were perfectly secure, and ordered 1st Canadian to begin landing at dawn on the 17th of June. The arrival of German troops north of Oristano had compelled him to get as much force ashore as possible. The 4th Mixed Division was still in Bizerte waiting for shipping to return for sealift. That force could land at Cagliari if it was cleared in time.

Needing armor support up north, Monty also recalled 1st Armored Brigade, leaving a reinforced regiment of the 3rd Infantry to continue the push south towards Cagliari. He was throwing a bone to Patton, who was hell bent on getting that port before the British could claim bragging rights.

To that end, a fast-moving battalion from CCA of 1st Armored had landed and ran like a halfback through a hole in the lines of the retreating Italians. They pushed all the way to Decimomannu, just five kilometers from the valuable airfield there, but had to stop when they ran into the Italian 184th Nembo Parachute Regiment. The resistance of the Italian Sabaouda Division was slowly crumbling, for there were only German Luftwaffe troops, a single field battalion and flak units, to try and give the division some support. They were fighting for native soil now, and acquitting themselves well, but the Big Red 1 and TF Abrams were simply too much for them.

At this time, the Italian senior commander on the island, General Basso, elected to begin moving the 203rd Coastal Division troops north. They were on the east coast, so the going would be slow, but it would at least give him something in reserve for the battle that would surely come north in time.

Von Senger was restless, knowing he had a good position with 15th Infantry north of Oristano, but those troops were now under a great deal of pressure as 1st Canadian came onto the line, very eager to prove their worth. The Canadians had not land at Dieppe, for that operation was never staged in 1942, so this was their first action of the war. They had moved up on the left, through Torre Grande and Nurachi, and tanks from the 12th Battalion, 3 Rivers Regiment, stormed back over the small airstrip at Milis.

Now Von Senger's mood improved with the arrival of the first units from the 90th Panzergrenadier Division from Corsica. Kube's Pioneer Battalion and the 190th Panzer Battalion under Zunger were the first to arrive. They had moved by Siebel Ferry from Bonifacio, and landed at the small port of

Saint Teresa. The Italian Cremona Battalion of light armor had come with them, and the rest of the 90th was heading south, where more barges and ferries were gathered at Porto Vecchio for the sealift operation to Sardinia. Von Senger asked the Luftwaffe to concentrate heavily over those ports to protect the barges, and the move was planned at night. KG Keyser was next to be lifted, on the night of the 18th, and they would be followed by KG's Panzenhagen, and von Behr, each being two battalion formations.

The, on the morning of the 18th, von Senger received a message from Kurt Student. Fresh off the trains from Syria, the 1st Fallschirmjager had arrived in Italy near La Spezia, and Hitler had ordered it to be ready to fly to Sardinia or Corsica at the discretion of the local commander. They would be ordered to fly directly to La Madalenna, which received two battalions on the 19th of June, with a third battalion flying into Porto Vecchio on Corsica, where it would complete the journey via Siebel ferry. The shallow draft motorized barges that were conceived as part of the plan to invade England were now being put to very good use.

As it happened in Sicily, Montgomery had drawn the bulk of the best German troops to his front, and all these troops would eventually move south to shore up the lines of 15th Infantry. It was now clear that Patton was going to liberate Cagliari before 3rd Infantry could get much farther south.

"Monty took Oristano," said Patton to Bradley as the two men drove forward. "Since then he's push no more than seven kilometers north, and that was because they put in paratroops up there. In that time we've pushed all of 45 kilometers from our beachhead, and cut those Limeys off coming down from the north.

"George, you're supposed to be cutting the Germans off, not the British. And don't forget, Monty's up against the German 15th infantry division."

"Don't sell these Italian fellow short," said Patton. "They've been fighting like hell, but they can't hold against our armor. I want to be in Cagliari tomorrow. All we need is another 15 klicks, but we've got to get through the Nembo Para Regiment first. We crack that nut, and it should be smooth sailing after that. Then I can get up north and take La Maddalena."

"George, you sound like you're late for dinner."

"Well you heard the briefing—time is money, and I plan on spending mine well."

On the morning of June 19th, the 601st Tank Destroyer company rolled onto the tarmac at the Elmas airfield, just five kilometers northwest of the

port of Cagliari. The city was now being held by two Luftwaffe flak companies, the Cagliari Commando Battalion, and the Headquarters of the Sabaouda Division. The troops of that division had been largely destroyed, and general Battista feared he would soon become the first Italian senior officer to surrender and yield a major city and port on Italian homeland soil. The value of Cagliari could not be understated, and there were five airfields in that region that would allow the Allies to swarm in from North Africa and set up their hives on the island. From those fields, they could neutralize Italian and Luftwaffe units at Palermo and Trapani, thus opening the approaches to the Sicilian Narrows.

* * *

On the night of the 19th, 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 16th Infantry Regiment marched up the coastal road to the edge of Cagliari. They would try to take the port by storm, supported by two more battalions of TF Abrams mech infantry, and two more companies of light tanks. In this action, and at Decimomannu Airfield to the north, the Americans would face their toughest fighting since the landing. The Nembo Paras were putting up a tenacious defense, and the Cagliari Commandos moved from one warehouse to the next, fighting for every foot and building along the harbor.

The Americans had tried to sneak over the long narrow Barracone Isthmus, a finger of land that pointed to the northern edge of the harbor. It had one road, which ended in a short bridge to another spit of land which was an open field sport's ground. Behind that was a canal, with yet another bridge, and then the outer buildings of the harbor. The first one they had to take was the Cement Works, used to build and fortify the moles and quays, and it was itself a solid concrete building, right at the edge of that canal.

The M5-Stuarts fired away at it, but made little impression. It was going to need fire from the Shermans, but they were having difficulty coming along that narrow road. Three tanks brought their bigger main guns to bear, and forced the Commandos to retreat, allowing the infantry to occupy those works, but the enemy had just fallen back to the next warehouse, and the fight began anew.

It took two hours to get forward to the grain stores, and then work towards the first big harbor mole, just west of the Coal Yard. Above that was the rail station, with more very sturdy concrete buildings that housed the

engines and rolling stock, and between the two, were heavy walled warehouses.

These terrain features multiplied the defensive power of that single Commando battalion immensely, and the fighting would go on all night at the west end of the harbor. Coming from the north, the mechanized detachment from TF Abrams had to first take the city Power station, then the Phosphates Factory, another cement plant and smelting refractory, all tough fighting, with the bullets snapping off concrete and metal sided walls, and the infantry dismounting to try and make grenade rushes in the darkness. If the Italians were going to fight like this for the relatively small port of Cagliari, the US troopers could only imagine what it would be like trying to take a big city like Naples, or god forbid, Rome.

At 2AM, TF Abrams had cleared out the refractory, and was probing down Viale Trento, only to take more heavy fire from the first of several Army barracks buildings in the city. The Commandos knew every nook and cranny in the town, and they were using that knowledge to move about with good stealth, and surprise the Americans at every street corner. In spite of their skill and valor, Patton was informed that his men had taken the harbor just before dawn. The hold there was rather precarious, for only D Company, of the 66th Armored Cav, and 2nd Company of the 753rd Armored Battalion had made it to the big tobacco factory off Viale Regina Margherita.

In spite of the hour, the General took out a nice thick cigar and lit up in the grey dawn, which was exactly what the men of D Company were doing when they saw what was stored away in that tobacco factory.

General Battista would surrender that morning, but the Cagliari Commandos refused to lay down their arms. Instead they took the road out of the city, commandeering any vehicle they could find, and sped away toward San Gregorio to the northeast. The only forces still fighting were the Luftwaffe Flak guns near Monserrato Airfield.

The Nembo Paras still held Decimomannu field, but when they heard the Americans were behind them, there was a discussion as to what they should do. The way north was impossible, and they knew they were cut off. Colonel Lucerna considered surrendering, but the 12th Battalion refused, insisting the regiment should fight to the last.

The first laurels went to Patton and the US Army. They had landed and driven 60 kilometers to Cagliari, half way across the island, while during the same four days, Monty had gone a third that distance, and was still heavily

engaged 10 klicks north of Oristano. The Canadians had made excellent progress on the left, but just when it seemed that the German line was breaking, more reinforcements arrived. KG Keyser moved into the small town of Bonarcado to shore up that flank, and the rest of the 190th Division was now mustering near Abbasanta behind the main line of resistance.

When he heard Patton was in Cagliari, Montgomery turned to a nearby aide. "As usual," he said, "Patton is gallivanting about while we take on the Germans."

"But General," said the aide. "He was only carrying out your plan. True?" At that, Monty smiled, but 'Gallivanting' would not be half a word for what Patton would do next.

Chapter 29

The landings on Sardinia had done more than many realized to affect the general morale of the homeland. Instead of bolstering it, and instilling a fervor to defend the sacred soil of Italy, it had the opposite effect. The Italians now saw their position in the Axis as completely untenable. Though Mussolini attempted to shore up the will of his regime and nation to resist, he stumbled in his last important public speech.

“The enemy must play his card,” said Mussolini. He has proclaimed high and low that he will invade the continent... otherwise he will face defeat even before fighting. Clearly this attempt will fail.... As soon as the enemy attempts to land, he will be frozen at the line the sailors call *il Bagnasciuga*, that line in the sand where the water stops and the land begins.... Having an iron, unshakable, and granite will, the Fascists will prevail.”

Many listening on the radio looked at one another with a bemused expression, and some laughed when the dictator said this. For *il Bagnasciuga* was not the line in the sand as Mussolini believed, but the water line on the hull of a ship. The word he should have used was *battigia*.

Something was clearly wrong with Il Duce. He had been suffering from abdominal pain for months, was often bedridden, and now he seemed to be off in his head. News of the landing on Sardinia was closely watched by the homeland population, and Mussolini’s boastful words were put to rout, even as his soldiers were when Patton took Cagliari. The general populace could not help but notice that the only defensive front that was holding the line on the island was the area occupied by German troops.

For months, powerful forces had been circling the King, Emmanuel III, and pressing him to sanction a change of government. One Dino Grande, an intelligent and influential aristocrat, was the former Ambassador to the UK, well known to Churchill himself. Disenchanted with Mussolini, and believing that Fascism had run its course, he secretly, then openly, pressed for change. He had long opposed Italy’s entry into the war, and now his warnings of disaster seemed to be vindicated. It was largely his organization and planning that would soon lead to the fall of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, and the headlines Patton would make in the days ahead served to fan the flames of

that entire process. A clock was ticking, the second hand harried on with every mile that Patton would gain in what would now become an unbridled romp through southern and central Sardinia.

The 90th Panzergrenadier division had finally arrived in full, and every gain achieved by Montgomery was put in check with a fresh battalion coming to the front at just the right moment. Yet now the Germans had concentrated all their best troops in one area, two divisions opposing three under Montgomery.

The first regiment of Student's paratroopers had landed, but with little in the way of transport, von Senger decided to leave them in the north to prepare defenses where the island narrowed towards La Maddalena. With Allied air units now operating from Sardinia, bringing in the rest of the division by air transport was risky, so it was decided to move it by sea from La Spezia—but to Corsica instead of Sardinia. Von Senger was already hedging his bets. The chips he had on the table looked good at the moment, but his fortunes could reverse at a moment's breath.

Speaking with General Basso, he began to plan the defense in the north, asking the Italians to move the Calabria Division from its current post around Sassari, to the island's Capitol at Nuoro. Aside from the retreating 203rd Coastal Division, there was nothing on that side of the island to stop the Americans if they pushed north in earnest. The Calabria Division would move by rail on the night of the 20th of June, even as the final cabinet meeting of the Fascist Regime was taking place in Italy, where Mussolini would get heavy pressure to find a way to exit the war.

It was only a matter of time now before von Senger would have to order a general retreat to the north. While his line was holding, it had several liabilities. The Allied navy had returned, and they were pounding the western segment of the line near the coast, aiding the enemy's strongest attack being put in by the 1st Canadian Division. Secondly, all of the 3rd Division had now come up from the south, and it was attempting to flank the position in the higher country to the east.

Thirdly, there was Patton, moving without rest in the south and assembling task forces with his swift moving armored cav and mechanized infantry units. The 'Goat Trails' he had complained about were still usable for these tracked vehicles, narrow roads that would still allow him to move quickly north. The last straw on this camel's back was the fact that the Allies still had an almost unlimited pool of resources to draw from in North Africa.

The British 4th Mixed Division was the next in line to deploy, already boarding the ships for Cagliari.

The Luftwaffe had tried, unsuccessfully, to interdict that port from Palermo, Trapani, and Marsala on the western tip of Sicily, but those fields were quite far off, 325 kilometers in the case of Trapani, and 380 for Palermo. Even the Allied fields at Bizerte and Tunis were closer.

The Allies had their first functioning port on Italian soil, and the Luftwaffe could not do anything about that, now or in any foreseeable future. What was once air superiority for the Allies, was rapidly becoming Air supremacy, and this was going to make a major difference in the conduct of all these operations.

On the 21st Patton was already 30 clicks north of Cagliari, moving the 1st infantry up towards Monty's right, and sending his armored spearheads to the east coast. There was little resistance as they advanced, but north of Capo Bellavista, the coast road turned inland and began to climb into the more rugged country that is the Orosei and Gennargentu National Park today, heavily wooded country with very few roads. It was here that the retreating Italians would attempt to set up blocking positions, cutting down trees and using any explosives they had to clog up the narrow roadways with rocks and tree trunks.

"We've got only two roads worth the name there," said Bradley. "One is state Route 69, through this high country here. It twists and turns like a snake. The other is through this heavy woodland farther east, and both are hell on earth for armor."

"General Truscott," said Patton. "If I rustle up some landing craft, what do you say to a little end around to flank that position by hitting the coast further north?"

"Well," said Truscott. "The most we could lift would be a few battalions. Don't forget the enemy still has subs in the Tyrrhenian Sea. How long would they be out there? It could take days for us to push through those mountains. What if the Germans come down from the north? Those boys could be chopped up on that coastline."

"Find the infantry," said Patton. "Get it from Allen if you have to, but I want this ready to go when I give the word." Delay was not a word in Patton's vocabulary.

"We've got 1st Infantry in the center of the island," said Bradley. "What about Matt Ridgeway's troops?"

“Brad, that’s a great idea. We could even consider another small air landing. Hell, the British pulled that off on the first night of the invasion. If we get stuck, I want a way to get in behind their line and unhinge the defense. Let’s plan it.”

* * *

By the 22nd of June, 4th Mixed Division had landed at Cagliari and moved north to Oristano, giving Monty his four divisions. Now he began to plan his big “breakout” attack, intending to apply pressure all along the line, preceded by all his artillery. It was an attack of the sort he might have planned at El Alamein, a battle that was never fought in this history, thanks to Brigadier Kinlan’s strange and unexpected arrival.

The plan would line up his divisions from the coast and east as far as Lake Tirso just east of Abbasanta: 1st Canadian, 51st Highland, 4th Mixed and then 3rd Infantry. Beyond his far right, Allen’s 1st US Infantry had come up near the mountain town of Sorgono. Monty at last thought he could get moving again.

“Now Patton is hung up in the high country,” he said. “So we’ve simply got to break out and push north to settle this matter.”

Monty had four divisions to Patton’s two, better terrain in front of him, and support from the navy along the coast. All he had to do was get through the Germans. It was the sheer weight of that attack that would do the job. The Germans had been fighting for a solid week, and many battalions were worn down. The heavy naval bombardment on the coast was as horrific as it was effective, with 15 inch shells plowing into the ground and sending up huge geysers of dirt and rock.

The 3rd Division front was largely screened by Italian remnants in the high country, a few Sardinian cavalry battalions, the Isili CCNN Battalion, and some Blackshirt motorcycle troops. They could not hold the steady advance of the British infantry, held up more by fatigue and the hills they had to climb than by anything the Italians were doing. This had prompted von Senger to pull out five battalions of the 15th Division to backstop that segment of the front, which thinned out the entire German line. Two divisions were trying to cover over 50 kilometers, and it would not do.

Monty’s attack had convinced von Senger that his game here was all but over.

“We can no longer hold this line,” the General told 15th Division commander Buschenhagen. “If we continue to fight here, we’ll simply be overrun. So we must pull out, and things are about to get very fluid now. There is no way we can hold the remainder of the island, particularly the northwest around Sassari. Therefore, we will pull out under cover of darkness tonight, and fall back towards La Maddalena. Student moved two regiments there from Corsica, and the front narrows toward the tip of the island. This is our only option with the forces available, and we must also get our Luftwaffe squadrons to Corsica.”

It was a grim but realistic assessment of Axis prospects on the island. The Bari and Sabaouda Divisions were mostly destroyed, 203rd Coastal Division was in the woodland on the east coast waiting for Patton to clear the roads and reach their lines. The Calabria Division was at Nuro, and that night, the 15th Infantry slipped away, up the main road to that city. The Italians retreated as well, but with little transport, they were mostly on foot. That fact would see them fall well behind the German columns, and they would become the *de facto* rearguard, just enough of a nuisance to slow Montgomery’s pursuit down.

Yet Monty did not have the same temperament that would have seen Patton fuming at his men to keep moving. Instead, he paused after dusk to ‘assess’ the situation, telling his division commanders that they would renew the big push at first light. This would give him time to freshen up the artillery and ‘sort things out,’ as he described the situation.

The morning of the 23rd, his second attack seemed to hit thin air, blowing right through the remnants of the Italians, with 51st Highland storming into Abbasanta, and the Canadians pushing up the coast through Modolo. They eventually caught up with the Germans, and thought it wise to organize instead of trying to mount an attack from march.

As for Patton, when he heard that Monty was launching a big push, he decided to play his trump card. At dawn on the 23rd, a reinforced regiment of Ridgeway’s 82nd Airborne would fly all the way from Tunis and Bizerte, intending to land in the rolling farmland between Dorgali and Orosei on State Highway 125. The paratroopers would come down all over the place, some landing on rooftops, barnyards, and bales of hay. At the same time, a battalion of Darby’s Rangers, and 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 101 Royal Marine Commandos, would hit the coast north of Orosei near Cala Liberotto.

These landings were behind the headquarters of General Sardi’s 203rd

Coastal Division, which was most alarming when he realized that his retreat and supply route up the coast was now cut. His men were still fighting to delay the American advance in the rugged woodland, but he soon learned that there was a long column retreating some 15 kilometers to the north... and they were Germans. He did not have to scratch his head too much longer to decide what to do. If the German 15th Infantry was retreating north, he had no desire to try and become a war hero here.

The war itself had become hugely unpopular throughout Italy, particularly when Allied bombers staged raids on the harbor at Naples and on the outskirts of the Eternal City, Rome. With Matt Ridgeway's tough paras behind him, and a snarling armored task force coming at him with dismounted infantry backed by tanks, he opted to try and seek terms. General Sardi chose to surrender, and all but one battalion of the 203rd Coastal Division simply evaporated, like mist in the woodland. Only the Logudoro CCNN and 2nd Blackshirt Battalion would fight on near Dorgali, and the intrepid Cagliari Commandos, now reduced to 10 squads, would try and hold on the river near Orosei with the help of the San Efiso CCNN Battalion.

Now it was Monty's turn to do some broken field running. With the Germans withdrawing, the way north was suddenly wide open. He ordered the divisional band of the 51st Highland to break out the fife and drums, and the skirl of the pipes could be heard in the streets of Macomer as his men marched through.

The plan now was a simple one. 1st Canadian was tasked with driving up the coast and dealing with the 204th Coastal Division. They were to go all the way to the northwest segment of the island, and secure Alghero, Sassari and Porto Torres. 51st Highland would push through Macomer, but follow the rail line northeast to Chilivani and secure the airstrip there. They would then continue on the main road towards Olbia on the northeast coast. The other two British divisions would push due north to Chilivani and follow the 51st, or take parallel roads that made their way through the highland north of the Capitol at Nuoro. That objective would fall to Patton, as he had already cut the road to the east and west of that city.

From Kesselring's perspective in Italy, it seemed that the entire defense of Sardinia was suddenly collapsing. He called von Senger to find out what was happening, and the General assured him that this was a planned withdrawal.

"We have to get to a position where they cannot turn our flanks. I will retrench on the line from Olbia to Porto Cruzitta, and hold that as long as

possible to cover La Maddalena. As for the Italians, they are dissolving quickly. Quite frankly, this will likely have repercussions in Italy proper. You had better look over your shoulder.”

“What about the Luftwaffe?” asked Kesselring.

“What about them? We have lost all the good fields in the south, and so most of the squadrons have flown off to Corsica. The fields there are limited, so some have even had to return to Italy. They will have complete air supremacy now. We couldn’t even stop the movement of a reinforcing division into Cagliari. That is what is going to lose us this war—the enemy air power.”

“Very well,” said Kesselring. “Hold on as long as you can. The Führer needs toughness now, not another quick defeat.”

“We weren’t ready,” said von Senger. “The 15th had only just arrived, and by the time the 90th got here, it was already too late. We would be better off getting over to Corsica while we can.”

“That may end up being the order,” said Kesselring, “but I must consult Hitler. Collapse has a way of cascading from one front to another, so do whatever you can to hold on there.”

Kesselring was beginning to feel like the patron saint of lost causes. Ever since the Allies had landed at Casablanca, it had been one backward step after another, and now, with Corsica coming into the Allied crosshairs, Rome or even Southern France were now possible targets. After seeing this, he would spend a very long night re-thinking his position on Sicily.

Chapter 30

The young Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams was right out in front with the men of his Task Force as it motored up the main road to Nuoro. First built by the ancient Romans, it wound through a narrow valley, with occasional vineyards and orchards crowding the base of the hills, until it reached the town, situated on the slopes of Monte Ortobene. Over the centuries, it's stone streets had heard the footfalls of Roman Legions, The Vandals, and soldiers of the Byzantine Empire. Now it would hear the rattle and grind of heavy tank tracks, and the soldiers of General Casula's Calabrian Division crouched behind makeshift field works, waiting in the tense evening of June 24th.

Abrams had rolled up with two companies of the 753rd Armor Battalion, three Mech Infantry Battalions, Armored Engineers, and Armored Cav. In all, he had 53 tanks and the power of a full brigade at his disposal, including a battalion of tracked artillery.

He stopped in the cool evening, and then sent word to bring up the interpreter and a squad with a white flag. Those men were sent forward, the interpreter shouting that they wanted to parley with the local commander, and would guarantee his safety if he would agree to meet with Abrams.

"General," he said after giving Casula a formal salute. "I am only a Lieutenant Colonel, but my country has seen fit to give me the means of making war here, in this quiet valley, and doing so with terrible power. I have sixty tanks with me." A little exaggeration could not hurt, thought Abrams. "Not 15 kilometers to the south on this mountain road, there is yet another Combat Command—fully mechanized—and behind that the entire 1st US Infantry Division. To your north, the British 3rd Infantry Division is assembling in force, three full brigades there as well. The road behind you is already cut off, so there can be no further retreat. Is there any reason for us to destroy this beautiful city tomorrow? Won't you consider that you and your men have done all that you could to serve honor, and stand for your nation. But now this fight should be over."

General Casula nodded gravely as the interpreter finished. "You have driven us from our North African colonies," he said, "and now you come to our homeland. What else can I do but oppose you?"

“You can live,” said Abrams bluntly. “You can consider that your allegiance to Hitler was a grave mistake, and one that brought me here with orders to plow right through this town in the morning. Rest assured, I can do that, but I would much rather see you and your men live on after this, because if I have to come in here tomorrow, a lot of good young men will die, and needlessly so. Do you realize yours is the only Italian Division still under arms south of La Maddalena?”

The General did *not* realize that, for he had heard no news of what was happening. “The Germans have already abandoned you. They retreated towards Olbia and they are many miles north of you by now. What purpose does it serve for us to destroy this place, when you can do so much more by coming to terms—you can save it from the ravages of this war. Look around you, sir. Fight, and this city will die tomorrow. Shake my hand now instead, and it lives on, you and your men live on as well, and perhaps you would even consider joining us so that we can chase the Nazis out of your homeland altogether, because that is exactly what we are going to do. Now... If you need time to consider this, I can wait until 04:00 hours. After that.... Well, I have my orders.”

General Casula took a deep breath. He had six understrength battalions. They had very few anti-tank guns, and only a few AT Rifles against all the armor he could see around him now, carefully lined up by Abrams to make his point. A little theater never hurts. Then a runner came up wearing a British uniform and Beret. The man saluted and spoke.

“Excuse me Colonel. I was sent here by General Ramdsen to tell you that the whole of our division is now in position and ready to coordinate the attack with you at the designated hour.”

General Casula knew just enough English to understand what had been said. He decided that he and his men would live.

* * *

The Allies would spend the next two days negotiating the mountain roads on the approach to Olbia. Everything was converging there, leaving little room for the American divisions because the British had not pushed all the way to the north coast. The town of Tempio was unoccupied by either side on the main rail to La Maddalena. The Canadians were in Sassari, and making ready to push on to Porto Torres. It seemed as though the campaign was

coming to an end, at least for the Italian troops on the island, but there was still the matter of von Senger's two German divisions. The arrival of two Regiments of Student's Paras brought his entire force up to strength, and he was in a much better position now than he was down south above Oristano.

Yet the Allies would begin lining up six divisions, and on a front stretching no more than 55 kilometers. The ground was rugged, and well suited to the defense, but those were steep odds. The Germans had 12 PzKfw-IVF2's, 18 light Lynx Pz-II's, and ten Marders for armored support. The allies had easily more than two full armored divisions. In spite of that, von Senger was digging in, prepared to fight it out unless Kesselring ordered him to move to Corsica. The time to do that was now, and he waited anxiously by the telephone for news.

Hitler was astounded that the island could fall so easily. The Generals at OKW explained that the divisions had only recently arrived, formed from March replacement battalions; that they were underequipped, had few tanks, and were faced by vastly superior odds.

"They will fight if you order it," said Zeitzler. "But it will only be a matter of time on Sardinia after this, and we will have the ignominious honor of watching those divisions destroyed for the second time. Do not forget what we lost in Tunisia. If they could get to Corsica, then they could at least force the enemy to plan, stage, and execute yet another amphibious assault, and that will be expensive in both time and resources, particularly the shipping."

"Where was Raeder?" said Hitler. "I recalled his ships from the Black Sea to prevent such a landing. What was he doing?"

"I cannot speak for the Navy, but it would be my opinion that he could not have done much to stop the landing on Sardinia. His ships would have been under all the enemy air power if he came anywhere near the beachheads. Corsica might be better defended, or else he might be better used to defend Toulon or La Spezia."

"He is good for nothing," said Hitler. "He did one thing right when he delivered the Black Sea, but otherwise the steel we used to build those ships has been a great waste. Very well, I can see no point in having those two divisions destroyed on Sardinia. As you say, once was enough. Order them to evacuate to Corsica, but that island must be held."

* * *

The Germans knew that the only chance for an evacuation of Sardinia

would have to be by night. Daylight moves would be exposed to the withering power of the Allied air forces. To facilitate the operation, the Luftwaffe promised to use any night fighters they could scrape up, and deploy them to cover the Bonifacio Strait.

It was a well-run operation, with the artillery and vehicles withdrawing to Palau and then taking the ferry to La Maddalena Island, where a host of Siebels waited to move them to Corsica. The infantry departed directly from Porto Cruzitta, St. Teresa, Palau, and a full regiment of Student's troops withdrew to the port at Olbia and left on small boats and ferries from there. Troops of Allen's 1st Infantry and elements of TF Abrams pushed up the road to Olbia, but they were too late to stop the first evacuation. Their arrival would force the remainder of 15th Infantry to fall back on La Maddalena, and the smaller ports farther north.

Skillful at mounting delaying rearguards, the Germans were able to conduct an orderly withdrawal, though by day, the Allied fighters hounded and strafed any boat or ferries they found, sinking five Siebels.

So by day the Germans would move overland to the ferry and port sites, and by night they would cross the Straits. They would save 90% of their forces, which Kesselring considered a great success. Though he had hoped to delay the fall of Sardinia much longer, most major combat was over three weeks after the initial landings. The Allies would be another week rounding up and disarming any remaining Italians, and the whole operation was considered complete by July 15. Then the movement of supplies and material into Cagliari, Oristano and any other suitable landing site continued.

The buildup for the next jump, be it to Sicily, Corsica, or the Italian mainland, was soon underway, and the debate over which operation to choose was the next item on Eisenhower's agenda. Corsica was deemed valuable to the Allies because it could provide bomber bases, and extend air cover into the Northern Med, and also become a base permitting further operations against Southern France or Northern Italy. But Eisenhower was told it was not essential if the next objective was Rome. He was briefed by Tedder and the Air Force commanders to determine the value of Corsica to the enemy.

"There are only a few decent air fields useful to the Luftwaffe," he explained. "These are at Bonifacio and Porto Vecchio in the south, Ajaccio on the west coast, and Calvi and Bastia in the north. We estimate that they could base and support no more than 450 aircraft there, and that even if they did so, our own forces could control and neutralize a force on that scale. In effect, we

believe that we can hold the airspace over Sardinia secure.”

“Even up north?” asked Ike.

“Yes sir, even as far north as La Maddalena.”

“And yet,” said Montgomery, “the planners have indicated that any assault on Corsica should be made as soon after the fall of Sardinia as possible. Otherwise the Germans could strongly reinforce there. We were to use the same forces and shipping we have in hand now to do the job, and bring in the Free French Division as a point of honor.”

“Yes,” said Eisenhower, “but the plan also reads—and I quote: ‘This operation should be initiated only if it becomes evident that Corsica is to be appreciably reinforced, and only if at that time full use of Sardinia as an air base is deemed essential, or if future amphibious Operations against Southern France are contemplated.’ If we’re only going to Italy, then we can do so without Corsica. All we really need now is to develop port capacity on Sardinia, and Cagliari is our best bet.”

Montgomery spoke next. “We can use that for at least one assault division to embark, and the others assigned can sail directly from Tunis and Bizerte, sail due north, and rendezvous off Cagliari. We should be able to float three divisions for the first wave of any assault we plan, and protect them. The only question now is the target. My people are already working up a briefing on beach conditions near Rome. I’m told we have prospects south of the city, near Anzio, and that there are also good beaches north between Fiumicino and Civitavecchia. That last city can also offer us a small port to lift supply in after we take it.”

“We have a good deal to do beyond that,” said Eisenhower. “First, we need to set the primary objectives, both operationally and on the strategic level. Then we need to assess risks, and allocate resources needed to minimize them.”

“Rome is the obvious objective,” said Montgomery.

“Yes, but we don’t know whether the Germans will fight to hold the south as yet. The next few weeks should be very telling on that score.”

“If I may,” said Patton. “Rome is a great political objective, no argument there. Old King Alaric knew the value of the place when he first marched the Visigoth Army to sack Rome in the year 410. That aside, we could march in there on D+1 but still couldn’t claim any legitimate victory in Italy.”

“It would very likely topple the Italian Fascist Regime,” said Brooke. “Our Mister Churchill is quite convinced of the value of that. He wants us to

hurl a wildcat ashore. And stir things up over there.”

“As he should,” said Patton. “Now, I’m just a crazy old horse cavalryman, but my view is that the Fascists are finished in Italy as things stand. They’ll collapse within weeks.”

“Possibly,” said Brooke. “But Italy could still choose to fight on under a new government. Taking Rome would be decisive.”

“But it wouldn’t mean we’ve defeated the German Army in Italy,” said Patton. “You can bet Hitler will be planning to seize the reins over there, no matter what the Italians do. Hell, he’s already moving divisions out of the Middle East and into Italy at this moment. Rome is one thing, very symbolic, but to win this, we’ve got to close with the enemy and take him by the throat. We’ve got to beat the German Army.”

“It we go for Rome,” said Montgomery, “then they’ll have to come north to stop us. From there we could cut off anything they choose to leave in the south. They would either have to evacuate or surrender.”

“Look,” said Patton. “We let them pull two goddamn divisions off Sardinia. Anything they evacuate from Southern Italy and Sicily is just another division we’ll have to fight somewhere else.”

“A fair point,” said Montgomery, “which is why we’re going to be looking at several other possible operations in the south. Some of these are already being sketched out. Operations *Buttress* and *Goblet* would be landings in Calabria on the toe of Italy, to cut off any Axis garrison on Sicily. They can live off the land there, but we can make sure they’ll never receive military supplies again with such a landing. Then we have *Musket* and *Slapstick*, both aimed at Taranto. If they do try to evacuate, they’ll do so through that port, and the major aerodrome of Foggia in that region. Considering Naples, we have *Gangway*, *Mustang* and *Barracuda*, all looking to make a direct assault there.”

“That port would be useful for our purposes,” said Eisenhower, “but the Germans could certainly not use Naples to evacuate a single platoon, particularly if we hit them on the kneecap at Rome. Napoleon said it best: Italy, like a boot, should be entered from the top. Marshall and the joint Chiefs went along with *Brimstone*, but as for all these other operations into Southern Italy, none of that has been agreed to. Draw up the plans, but realize that they will be subject to U.S. approval and cooperation. Marshall still sees a cross Channel attack as our next order of business, and he wants it as soon as possible.”

“Surely not before we’ve knocked Italy out of the war,” said Brooke.

“Frankly,” said Eisenhower, “I tend to agree with General Patton on that question. Attacking Rome will knock down the Italian government, Fascist or otherwise, but it won’t necessarily beat the Germans. We only have so much in the way of shipping and landing craft, so we need to plan this carefully. And remember, I’m to select seven divisions for transfer back to the UK for *Overlord* . Anything we do in Italy from this point forward will be determined by a lot of unanswered questions. Will Mussolini fall? Probably, but when, and how hard? Will Italy fight on? How many divisions will the Germans throw into this theater, and will they fight for the south? We need contingencies based on real intelligence of the enemy’s deployments. Then, no matter what we choose to do, we have to define clear objectives, a center of gravity for the entire operation, maintain a cooperative effort, plan proper phasing. We need a lot of answers before we can arrive at the best strategy here, and right now, all we have are the questions.”

There was a moment of silence before Brooke spoke again. “Does your General Marshall believe we can cross the Channel this year?”

“He hopes for that,” said Ike.

“Well, not to throw too many lumps in the tea, but Churchill has asked me to float one more idea. What about an invasion of France from the south? It would mean we take Corsica next, not Rome, and then from there we would have real choices. Do we strike east at Italy, or North and take Toulon and Marseilles? Remember, we can also muster troops in Spain for that. In this scenario, we might not want to transfer anything back home when we can put it to very good use right here.”

Too many cooks, it has been said, will spoil the broth.

Part XI

Curious Marbles

“I should wish to have, of the Acropolis, examples... of each cornice, each frieze, each capital of the decorated ceilings, of the fluted columns; specimens of the different architectural orders, of metopes and the like.... Finally, everything in the way of sculpture, medals and curious marbles that can be discovered by means of assiduous and indefatigable excavation.”

—Lord Elgin, 7th Earl of Bruce

Chapter 31

The master of the ship was a Mister George Parry, and when Elena and her small company finally located him in the harbor at Gibraltar, their brief meeting went very well.

“I expect your associates here will get on well enough,” said Parry, particularly since you say they are all more than willing to take on ship’s duties. But I’m afraid we haven’t much in the way of accommodations for a woman such as yourself, m’lady. However, it is a rare event that we would have a lady of stature aboard a poor ship like this. House of Fairchild, is it? It would seem that the only chivalrous thing a gentleman might do is offer my cabin for your comfort. You are more than welcome.”

“I cannot thank you enough,” said Elena, fawning a bit, and even giving the man a flirtatious glance, which Captain MacRae could not fail to notice. He smiled, giving Mack Morgan a conspiratorial glance.

The *Lady Shaw Stewart* was a Brig, with two masts (fore and main), and square-rigged sails. It was larger than a schooner, but smaller than a frigate, or any ship of the line, and often used for fast naval duties, or as a merchant transport, which was the case here. Britain was already extending her influence heavily into the Med, the twin poles of Gibraltar and Malta being essential outposts that would endure through the centuries. Lord Nelson shipped all his fleet supplies from Gibraltar to Malta, and from there, the transports would call on other ports and anchorages, or simply rendezvous with Royal Navy ships at sea.

As cargos were valuable, even if a ship was only carrying foodstuffs, fresh water, or other simple necessities, it was common to escort a transport to give the impression of some strength that might discourage piracy. In this case, the escort ship was a smaller schooner, the *Renard*, formerly a French ship by that same name, captured in November of 1803 off the small port of Calvi on the Island of Corsica. Two ships in Nelson’s squadron HMS *Cameleon*, and HMS *Statel*, were credited with the capture. A fast ship, *Renard* had a crew of 60 men, with twelve 4-pounder guns (six on each side), and four more “swivel guns,” which could rotate to port or starboard. Nelson immediately put it to good use as a merchant escort and messenger ship.

Normally, a ship would be renamed under these circumstances, and the new name “*Crafty* ” was already floating about in Nelson’s mind, though it had not yet been formalized.

At this time *Renard* was captained by Lieutenant Richard Spencer, who had once served on the very ship that first took *Renard* as a prize, the *Cameleon* . Spencer had been serving aboard Lord Nelson’s ship, HMS *Victory* , at the time he was appointed to take command of the *Renard* . He served well, except for one incident where Nelson had to reprimand him for temporarily leaving four merchant vessels to investigate rumors of a privateer off Syracuse.

The two ships would depart under favorable winds and head out into the Alboran Sea. It would be a journey of a thousand nautical miles to Malta, about five days sailing time if the wind could keep them moving at a speed between eight and ten knots. Few records remain to chronicle the voyages of *Lady Shaw Stewart* . At one point, she was intercepted by the Americans and taken as a prize, but at present, her duties were of a hum drum naval transport. The logs of the *Renard* record no incidents during the journey to Malta and on to Cerigo (Kythros).

No one aboard knew that this sailing would be the most significant mission ever undertaken by the ship. Elena could not believe their luck in finding it at just this time.

“You see, Mack,” she said by way of vindicating herself. “All this talk about us running afoul of pirates and changing history here by simply chartering a ship has now become a moot point. We will have a nice quiet journey. Finding this ship was a major windfall for our mission.”

“What makes you so sure?” said Morgan, still a bit wary.

“The history,” said Elena. “This ship reached Malta without incident. It also went on to Cerigo without incident, and was safely there until the coming February of 1805, when the marbles were finally loaded.”

“I wonder what took them so long,” said Morgan, hinting at something. “I mean, if we get there in the next few weeks, what happens in the five months between this day and 16 February, when the Marbles were loaded. You might ask this ship’s master when he expects to arrive at Kythros.”

“Call it Cerigo,” said Elena. “That’s what they called it at this time. And I can’t broach the subject with Master Parry just yet, because he doesn’t even know he’s going there.”

“What?”

“Think, Mack. We have the record of Lord Nelson’s letter ordering this ship to Cerigo, and it’s dated September 2, 1804. So Mister Parry hasn’t even received his orders yet. In fact, he probably won’t hear of this until we reach Malta, so hush up about Cerigo until we get there. Then we’ll take stock of the situation, and sort things out. I suggest you make yourself useful here, and help out with the ship. Otherwise, let’s enjoy the experience. It’s certainly going to be unique.”

“Aye,” said Morgan. “Very much so.”

As Elena had predicted, they would reach Valletta Harbor at Malta without incident. The weather remained fair, the winds favorable, and the ship made good time. Gordon was an old sailor, and had much experience on yachts and other sailing vessels. So he took to the situation with eager energy, and was soon much endeared by the local crew. It was as if they could perceive he was a man of some authority, for MacRae acted as though he was used to giving orders, and to the locals, it was clear that he was the man in charge of this little troop of visitors.

Elena spent a good deal of time in the Master’s cabin, finding that her presence on deck became a distraction for the crew, who kept looking her way, and speaking to one another in low whispers. They saw few ships in the transit, and the sight of Valletta was a thrilling moment, particularly for Captain MacRae.

“Look at the place,” he said, eyes alight. The city had a golden hue, from the yellowish stone that made up many of the buildings. “It’s like we were inside a movie. Do you realize we are the only humans to see the harbor this way in the last couple hundred years? Look there, see that star shaped fort? That’s Fort Saint Elmo, first built by the Knights of the Order of Saint John in 1551. It protected this place from the Ottoman Turks until the Knight left in 1798, and Napoleon thought to take the place two years later in 1800. The locals rebelled and, with our help, showed the French the door. Since then, Malta has been a British colony. The Maltese were only too happy to sign on with us, particularly since they knew Bonaparte was out to take the place.”

“We’ll want to see Alexander Ball,” said Elena. “Our contract here is safely concluded, but this is the very ship that sails for Cerigo, and we need to make sure we can stay on board when that happens. Ball was much liked by the Maltese, and instrumental in bringing the place under British rule. He’s the one with the authority to see that we get safely to Cerigo. I’ve taken some time to question our ship’s Master. He tells me they will normally be

the better part of a week off loading supplies here.”

“Who will we find at Cerigo?” asked MacRae.

“Any number of associates to Lord Elgin’s famous mission. We might find Mister William Richard Hamilton, Lord Elgin’s personal Secretary, or a Mister Giovanni Battista Lusieri, a man hired to create illustrations of the Marbles. Feodor Ivanovich was a Russian from Astrakhan that was taken on to make casts of the Marbles. The Reverend Philip Hunt was Lord Elgin’s Chaplain. He’s the man who drafted the so called ‘firman,’ a letter granting permission for the excavations to proceed at the Acropolis, and he interpreted his permission to view and document those artifacts quite loosely. I suppose we’re here now because of his... ingenuity.”

“Strange that none of them had any idea of what they were doing,” said Morgan. “No one knew anything about this hidden key.”

“Apparently not,” said Elena. “Frankly, I’m not sure we know what we’re doing either, other than to seize this chance as the only way we might possibly retrieve that key.”

“Which is yet another mystery,” said Morgan. “Oh, we know what they can do—secure the entrances to these time rifts. Yet I have to note that this rift was hidden in plain sight. There was no mysterious door to be opened, and nothing for a key to unlock. Yet here I’ve been told that the very key we’re after had geographic coordinates engraved upon it that pointed directly to St. Michael’s Cave. So what are we missing here?”

“A good point,” said Gordon. “I’m willing to speculate it has something to do with that box we left on the ship.”

“That’s my thinking as well,” said Elena. “The box was capable of moving the entire ship! That action was engaged by the simple insertion of the key I had, a key that *did* open a mysterious door beneath Delphi.”

“It did *two* things,” said MacRae. “It led us to Delphi, and then fit into that box, hand in glove, and brought us to the 1940s. You said you came to believe it was simply to find this other key, but how would we have possibly known about it? It was pure happenstance that we even learned it existed.”

“Not entirely,” said Elena. “The apertures in that box were clearly engineered to hold keys. They were clear evidence that other keys existed—seven, to be precise.”

“For what purpose?” asked Morgan.

“That’s part of the quest we’re on,” said Elena. “Once we get our hands on this key, perhaps we’ll know more.”

“What would we possibly learn?” said Morgan again. “This other fellow, Professor Dorland, he knew of this key—even claimed he once had it in his possession. Now, the man seemed clever enough. Yet he didn’t seem to learn anything more about this business.”

“Well here’s what we do know, said Elena. “We’ve a box that does something pretty damn amazing when I insert the key I was bequeathed. I was led to the site where we recovered that box by specific orders I received from the Watch. That was a secret group within the Royal Navy established by Admiral Tovey, and within that box, I find a note from him as well.”

“Well then why didn’t you ask him about it and be done with all this mystery?”

“Of course I asked him,” said Elena, giving Morgan those wide eyes. “He knew nothing about it—at least at this time. Perhaps Tovey doesn’t come into knowledge of the box for years. We can’t think about this in a linear fashion. We found the box in 2021, and it brought us to the 1940s. Whether we were meant to or not, we happened to learn of this key associated with Saint Michael’s Cave, and found ourselves in a perfect position to retrieve it—until the Germans complicated things by sinking the *Rodney* .”

“I still don’t see the connections,” said Morgan, shaking his head.

“I can’t say I do either,” said Elena, trying to be sympathetic. “Let me put it this way. It’s a puzzle, to be sure, but if we are to solve it, first we have to collect all the pieces. There are seven apertures, and I’m betting there are seven keys. We have two in hand, and this one will be the third.”

“The Box,” said MacRae quietly. “The first key moved us to the 1940s. I’m willing to bet that the second and third will move us somewhere else....”

The other two looked at him. It made perfect sense. Elena had once thought the very same thing, that the box was capable of moving anything in its immediate vicinity through time, and that each key would lead to a different point on the continuum. But why? This was what she voiced now.

“Yes,” she said. “Use a different key in that box, and we might end up somewhere else. I could have tested the proposition with the Key I received from Tovey—the one Fedorov gave to Admiral Volsky to deliver.”

“Fedorov? That young Russian Captain?” Morgan raised an eyebrow. “How did he come by it?”

“I was told it was given to him, by that older gentleman he introduced to us at the Alexandria conference—Kamenski. No, that isn’t correct. Fedorov told me he simply found it on the nightstand, in the quarters the Director

occupied onboard that ship—*Kirov* .”

“I was wondering how the Russians might figure in all of this. Could it be that ship came here to look for this key, just as we did?”

“To be honest, we had no idea we were coming here to look for anything at all,” said Elena. “No, I don’t think the Russians sent *Kirov* here deliberately. Fedorov said it was started by an accident in the Norwegian Sea, and I believe him.”

“Yet you say he found the key in the Director’s quarters aboard ship?”

“Correct, and this Kamenski fellow simply vanished.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that,” said MacRae.

“Nor I,” said Morgan. “Do you know who Kamenski was, Miss Fairchild? Well I do, because the two of us were in the same business—intelligence. Kamenski was a former Deputy Director of the KGB. If he had this key, then the Russians know more than you might believe. I’m still suspicious. Where did he find it? How long did he have it in his possession? Why would he leave something of such importance simply lying about on a nightstand?”

“Well,” said Elena, “when we get back, we’ll look up this Fedorov and you can run that by him. All I can tell you is what I’ve learned. How Tovey figures in, and the Watch I served, remains one little mystery here, and the Russian connection is another. The whole thing will likely end up being seven mysteries in an equally mysterious box, but we can only solve them by walking this path. For now, look out there at that harbor, gentlemen. That’s Valletta in 1804, and here we are. It’s damn amazing! I think we’ve more than enough on our hands now without trying to put everything together and see the big picture. We’ve got to simply focus on this mission, get our hands on that key, and then get ourselves safely back to St. Michael’s Cave.”

“Aye,” said Morgan. “Agreed. But I’ll take your advice when we do get back. I want to see this Captain Fedorov and learn what he knows. And I want to know why a highly placed former officer in the KGB, from *our* time, was cruising aboard that phantom Russian battlecruiser, and with one of the bloody keys in his pocket. And I want to know where he’s gotten himself to, and what he meant by leaving the damn key on that nightstand. These keys go places you say? I wonder where that would take us if we give it a twist in that box?”

“Something tells me we may find that out before this is resolved,” said Elena. “So let’s do the job here first, and see where that leads us.”

Chapter 32

It would be a long month before they would ever get passage to Cerigo. The *Lady Shaw Stewart* was waiting for other ships to arrive at Malta to form a convoy bound for the Levant. Ship's Master Parry finally received his orders, to sail for Cerigo with *Renard* as escort, but the initial leg of the voyage saw them sailing with three other ships. Eventually, the transport veered off, making for the site of the wreck of the *Mentor*, which was very near the small port of Avlemonas. But Mack Morgan seemed restless, pacing at times as they neared the Greek islands.

"What's eating at you?" Elena asked him one morning.

"Just fidgeting," he said. "Been thinking on this whole matter again, and I can't see how we can get our hands on this key. I mean, that business about us getting to the Selene Horse while it was still submerged has gone out the window now. They've already retrieved all the boxes, so our men can't do the dirty work concealed by water. So we're back to my old argument about us mucking about with a hammer and chisel."

"Then we'll have to try a different approach," said Elena.

"You know those artifacts will be guarded."

"Probably, but who will you put your money on, Mack, a few sleepy guards, who have been standing a dull watch on old wooden cases hidden on the beach, or my three Argonauts?"

"Alright, our men can force the issue, but what then? Do we just ransack the cases until we find the one holding the Selene Horse, break into it, and have at the thing with a hammer?"

"I'd like to try a little something different," said Elena. "I can be quite persuasive, and I think I could convince one of the men in charge of the recovery to let me have a look."

"You're going to tell them you've come all this way from the British Museum?"

"That would be a good line," said Elena. "I could say that word came of the mishap, and I was curious to inspect the artifacts and assess their value and quality."

"But there's one thing still bothering me," said Morgan. "This Dorland fellow. He claims he was aboard the *Rodney*, god only knows how or why.

He says he had occasion to get down into the hold where the Marbles were stowed away, along with a good portion of the King's bullion. He says he found the cases strewn about, one broken open, the base of the Selene Horse chipped, and there was this key. So.... How could we be getting our hands on it here?"

"It has to be here," said Elena. "This date precedes any other date where the key could have been tampered with or found."

"You misunderstand me," said Morgan. "Aye, I grant you that the key may be here, but how do we get it if this Dorland fellow says he found it in 1941? If that's true, then we fail here. Follow me?"

That was something that Elena had contemplated for some time. The key survived within the Selene Horse into modern times. It had been sitting there in the British Museum all along, and the custodians knew that the key existed. That had been a mystery for some time, though it was known only to a very few. It was thought to be an oddity, and never explained, she thought, until we started receiving those messages from the future, years later.... The keys were very important, they were essential, *critical*, and they must all be found and accounted for...

Shortly after they arrived she had come to think this whole quest for the key was her real mission here. It was out there, with the Elgin Marbles, aboard *Rodney*, and she was supposed to recover it. The key was right there, in the base of the Selene Horse.... She was already aware of two versions of that history, and both rang true. The first was the history of the hunt for the *Bismarck* that she knew from her own time. The second was a similar engagement with that ship, as she and Tovey, *Kirov* as well, tried to save the *Rodney*. They had failed, *Rodney* went down, with the King's bullion, the Elgin Marbles, and the key in her belly. That was the reason she was here at this very moment, to get to a place in time where they could retrieve the key before it ever saw the inside of HMS *Rodney*. Yet in both those histories, it clearly *was* loaded aboard that ship. The British museum even sent the Grey Friars over to sift through the remains of *Rodney* after the war when the ship was scrapped. Why would they do that, unless they knew the key had been loaded aboard *Rodney* in 1941? That jogged a memory of a conversation she had with Admiral Tovey...

"Most irregular," said Tovey. "*The Grey Friars sifting through the bones of old Rodney to look for this key... Well, they certainly had to know something of what they were looking for. You say the Watch learned of these*

keys in those strange signals you received in your time. If that is so, then how would anyone in the 1940's know about that key, or attribute any significance to it, particularly the Franciscans!"

"Very good questions," said Elena. "Yet this only remains perplexing when you assume that everyone alive in the here and now is native to this time. As you can see, you are presently sitting here with three people who were born long after your own death."

"Of course!" It was Fedorov speaking now, exclaiming his surprise in English. Then he spoke quickly, and Nikolin translated. "Other time travelers! ... Others may have used those holes in time."

"Well this is quite a fine mess," said Tovey. "People coming and going, just as they please, and fiddling with history! I knew this world was something quite different after I learned the truth about you and your ship, Mister Fedorov, but now it seems we have others involved in this whole affair, in these rift zones you speak of, coming and going like servants in and out of the back door."

Just like this little foray, thought Elena. Yes, the Grey Friars never found the key in the remains of old *Rodney*, and I was told why by this professor Dorland. He claimed *he* found it, and Mack thinks that means we will fail to recover it here.

"Dorland found the key, but only in one version of these events," she explained. "Then he claimed it vanished! He had it on a chain about his neck, and it disappeared."

"You mean he lost the damn thing?"

"No, this was something a little more mysterious. He claims it simply vanished. That is clear evidence that some variation in time occurred prior to his initial discovery of the key. It's the only explanation. He was trying to find a way to recover it himself, talking about visiting the Tubes in London where the Marbles were stored at one time, and then even suggested it might be found here. That's where I got the idea for this mission when we learned the rift under Saint Michaels Cave led to the 1800's."

"Visiting the Tubes won't work," said Morgan, "because we know—in both these *Bismarck* engagements—that the key was loaded aboard *Rodney*. So no one got to it in the Tubes, *or any time before that*. See my point? We've no reason to be here unless the key does get loaded aboard *Rodney*, and lost with her sinking. Yet if that is true, then there's no way we could find the key here. That would prevent it from ever getting to *Rodney*. This

whole thing goes ‘round and round in a circle!”

“Yet Dorland claims he had the key and it vanished. He went back to try and get aboard *Rodney* to fetch it again, but that mission failed too—perhaps because we find it here.” She smiled.

Each one seized upon the same reason to justify their arguments. Morgan asserted that if Dorland found the key, then they could not get to it here. Elena believed that the fact that Dorland’s key vanished meant that they *did* get to it here. Yet there was still the tinge of Paradox in the heart of their argument. Morgan did have one good point. If they did recover the key here, then it would never get to *Rodney*, nor would Dorland ever find it, or lose it. They would have no reason to ever come here, because the sinking of *Rodney* would not matter. The key would never be there....

She realized now that if they were successful, the first of Morgan’s objections to this mission would come into play—they *would change things*. She had taken great care to walk softly here. The talk of seizing a ship in Gibraltar’s harbor ended early on. Instead They had simply talked their way aboard the *Lady Shaw Stewart*, and here they were. No one had been harmed, and as far as she could see, no life line of anyone local to this time had been affected.

Yet the instant any of them set their hand upon this mysterious key, they would change things. This year antedated every other alteration made to the time continuum. It was 1804! This was all playing out well before *Kirov* ever made its first appearance and started knifing its way through the history of WWII.

We were told about that ship, she knew—*Kirov*—and that warning came from the future. Yet here I am about to do something that will introduce a major variation in time. I’m out to find and take this key, which means everything I did in my quest to find and save *Rodney* simply cannot happen. All those long conversations I had with Fedorov, and Admiral Tovey... They cannot occur. There will be no reason for those words to ever be spoken.

Then it struck her like a thunderclap. If I take this key, then we’ll never get back to the time line we left. We’ll be resetting it to an entirely new meridian, one where the urgency of our quest to find the key aboard *Rodney* never happens... and yet... it *must* happen. Otherwise, I could not be sitting here on this ship, in the year 1804.

Which one was correct? Was the sinking of *Rodney* and the loss of the key a mandatory event underpinning her mission here? If so, then Morgan

was correct—they would never find the key here. This was all a fanciful jaunt through time, and a dangerous one as well. They were going to fail.

“Damn it, Mack,” she swore. “Now you’ve gone and spoiled my day.” Yet at soon as she said that, her mind was already trying to find another reason that would permit their success here. She didn’t want these thorny wrinkles in time to dampen her ardor for the mission, determined as ever to find this key, and by so doing, get one step closer to solving the mystery they presented.

We could find the key, she thought, but then we might become the means it finds its way aboard *Rodney*. It was thin. She could not see that as happening, because she thought they would return to 1943, well after *Rodney* was sunk. I’m playing with fire here. I’m tiptoeing around the edges of Paradox, and by god, that’s dangerous.... Oh, Lord Elgin, you’ve no idea what your plunder may bring home to the Kingdom. But then again, neither do I.

* * *

As fate would have it, Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, would have his hand deep in the jar of time, and grasp more than he could fathom. Perhaps it was family lineage, heritage, or some arcane quality of the blood that would also make that strangely true of his son, James Bruce, the 8th Earl of Elgin, who would become both the Viceroy of India and High Commissioner and Plenipotentiary in China and the Far East. In that capacity, the 8th Earl would take part in yet another desecration of the arts, this time the so called ‘Summer Palace’ of the Qing Emperor of China, in the year 1860.

While the 7th Earl might rightly claim that his acquisition of the Parthenon Marbles was an act of conservation, the same cannot be claimed by the son. For it was James Bruce who delivered the final blow to the sprawling grounds and buildings of the Qing Palace in Peking. After three days of maniacal looting by French troops, and some British as well, the 8th Earl of Elgin ordered the entire place put to the torch, seeing hundreds of cedar buildings, reception halls, galleries, residences, museums, the whole lot go up in a pall of smoke that would hang over Peking for days.

It is a story that has its origins in British Imperialism, and the inevitable clash of cultures that often rose from it. The Western Powers had been

attempting to further their interests in the Far East, which led to demands for freer trade with China, the opening of ports, and more rights and privileges for British citizens engaged in those activities. Some of that trade, however, was the exchange of British cultivated opium for Chinese tea, silk, porcelain, and taels of silver, and as the opium addictions began to spread like a dark weed through Chinese society, conflict resulted that became known as the “Opium Wars.”

One such war had already been fought, concluded by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, an agreement the Qing Dynasty believed was “unequal.” It had been enforced by “gunboat diplomacy,” and so in 1856, when Britain began to clamor for a complete opening of China to free trade, a full legalization of the opium trade as well, conflict blossomed again from those weeds.

As always, big things have small beginnings, and it was a very small cargo ship, the *Arrow*, that would threaten to destroy the famous ‘Arrow of Time’ in a way no one then alive might fathom. The *Arrow* was a Lorch, which was a small ship rigged out with sails like a Chinese Junk, but having a European built hull. She had been registered to fly the British flag, and was anchored in the harbor at Canton, on October 8, 1856.

It was a fine morning, and the ship’s Master, young Thomas Kennedy, had taken a boat to row over to another Lorch, the *Dart*, where he was having breakfast with her Master. As they sat there, finishing up a cup of well brewed *Tieguanyin*, a tea known as “The Iron Goddess,” Kennedy noticed a couple of Mandarin boats rowing in towards his ship, the oars manned by rows of uniformed men.

“Now what are they up to?” he said aloud.

“Have you got passengers aboard?” asked the other Master. “They may be here to ferry them over to Hong Kong.”

“I’ve no passengers who expressed any such interest,” said Kennedy.... He stopped, staring, and watching as many of the oarsmen boarded his ship. Then his blood ran cold.

“By God in his heaven,” he exclaimed. “They’re hauling down the ensign! I’ve got to get over there!”

By the time he arrived, sweating with the exertion of his haste, he saw the situation was far more serious than it first seemed. Twelve members of his crew, all Chinese sailors, had been apprehended, their hands bound, and they were being led off his ship into the Chinese longboats. He was quick to come

along side, his anger apparent in his tone.

“What in bloody hell are you doing? What’s the meaning of this?”

Much of what he got back was in Mandarin, and he could not understand it. So his only recourse was to get himself to the British Consul and lodge a formal complaint with Sir Harry Parkes. Attempting to intervene by contacting the Imperial High Commissioner, Yeh Mingchen, Parkes would learn that the crew had been seized on suspicion of piracy.

“Is that so?” said Parkes, his feathers ruffled. (Adept at Mandarin, he was speaking in Chinese, though I paraphrase his remarks here for the English speaker’s ear.) “Well, you’ve come aboard a British flagged ship, and without getting leave to do so from the ship’s Master. You seized that ship’s lawful crew, and I want them returned, publicly. Then I will cooperate fully with you to investigate any crimes they may be accused of.”

His initial effort saw the release of nine men, but he refused to receive them, demanding the entire crew should be released before any charges were brought. If grounds were found for piracy, then he would turn them over to Chinese authorities himself.

“Send this to your High Commissioner,” he said to the messenger. “Tell him he has 48 hours to comply with this request, or I will escalate this matter for action by our Naval Board. I don’t know what these men may have done, and I’m fully prepared to get to the bottom of this, but by God, I’ll teach you to respect the British flag when you see one.” He folded his arms, adamant. “Do you hear me? Forty-eight hours!”

A day later a message was sent indicating that no British flag had been seen, and that the *Lorcha* was therefore not even a British registered ship!

“That’s an outrage,” said Master Kennedy. “I might be slack with me papers, but there’s no question that the ensign was flying clear and high on the mainmast that morning. I saw the ruddy buggers haul it down myself! I thought we taught them a lesson back in ‘42.”

“They’re crafty,” said Parkes. “We had Canton open as a single port for trade, and gained four others with the Treaty of Nanking, but we still can’t set foot off the docks and quays and even enter the goddamned city here. It’s as if they see us as a contamination. The Emperor sits up there in Peking, in his bloody palaces, and thinks he runs the whole bloody world! I’ll take this right on up to Sir John Bowring, Superintendent of Trade.”

He did exactly that, but found the High Commissioner Yeh to be very evasive, delaying at every turn, refusing to consult Peking on the matter. He

would finally simply drop off the remaining crew at night near the warehouses at the harbor, but Parkes and Bowring would not stand for that. They demanded that the crew be publicly reinstated, and a formal apology made. The High Commissioner was stubbornly silent, and the matter was then referred to Rear Admiral Sir Michael Seymour, the Commander of all British squadrons in the Far East.

A dozen crewmen and a flag... That was how it started, and it would end four years later, in a way that neither side could foresee, with bloodshed, war, fire and destruction. Before it ended, France, Russia and the United States would be drawn into the spinning gyre of the conflict, and the Russians would end up gaining their prized deep water port on the Pacific, Vladivostok.

The British would secure trade rights, open more Chinese ports, legalize the commerce of their opium, and demand and receive indemnity payments in silver. Yet these were the least important things they would acquire in that little spat. Though it was not anticipated or looked for, the 8th Earl of Elgin would find a treasure in the heart of Peking far greater than any he could imagine.

Chapter 33

The war, like all wars, started with a small dispute, its nascent fire being fanned by the pride of the men leading either side. Admiral Seymour would seize a few barrier forts on the rivers that flowed near Canton, and Marines would be landed to protect the Western controlled factories near the harbor. The Chinese High Commissioner would harass them day and night, attempt to poison Sir John Bowring and his family where they lived at Hong Kong, all while slowly assembling a small army to oppose the upstart Europeans, collecting war junks to challenge them on the rivers.

The Chinese, however, were not as adept at the art of war as their European opponents. The matter would escalate, until Canton itself was shelled and occupied, an amazing feat considering that this city of nearly a million people had been “taken” by a force of no more than 6000 troops from various nations, including Britain, Russia, France and the United States. High Commissioner Yeh himself would eventually be captured and sent off to a British prison in India, where he died of starvation, adamant to the last, as he refused to take any food from his captors.

The “incident” led to more demands upon the Chinese to open additional ports and loosen trade restrictions, and to force these concessions, an expedition would be mounted to the port of Tianjin in the north, the gateway port to the Emperor’s Capitol at Peking.

It must be said that of all the things the Emperor was contending with in those years, this little annoyance by the “barbarians” that had been infesting his coastline in recent years was not high on the list. There had been an internal rebellion underway for some time, and literally millions had died in that civil conflict. So the Xianfeng Emperor (Yizhu), and his Imperial Court, would make concessions, to the “foreign devils,” agreeing to a new treaty, thinking to dispense with the matter. But they would be very slow to sign and formalize any such arrangements, further trying the patience of the British and their allies.

It would be years after the initial “*Arrow* ” incident before the situation would escalate to a more serious conflict. In that time, Parkes, Bowring and Seymour would collect allies, ships, and men in Hong Kong, awaiting the arrival of Lord Elgin, who had been named High Commissioner and

Plenipotentiary in China and the Far East. The French had sent one Baron Gros to represent their interests. Though they outwardly agreed to negotiate, the Chinese would secretly summon one of their Mongolian Generals, Sengge Rinchen, to deal with the Europeans.

The British had taken the forts protecting the river once before, and rather easily, so on the 25th of June, 1859, they had every reason to think they would do the same thing. But things had changed. In the long year since the last time there had been trouble here, the Chinese had placed large heavy metal spikes in the riverbed, but claimed that they had been put there to prevent pirates from entering. The local authorities promised to remove them to allow a small British flotilla to pass, but instead, they began to strengthen the barriers, adding in boulders and smaller rocks. It was soon found that many other impediments had been built. First, piles were driven into the riverbed astride the main channel. Then iron chains studded with floating timber were stretched across the entire width of the river, and lastly, heavy rafts, many feet thick, were floated into blocking positions where the waterway narrowed.

“Typical of them,” said Admiral James Hope, the commander of the British Fleet for this adventure. “They speak out of both sides of their mouth, say one thing, but do another. This is intolerable. We shall have no recourse other than to run up the gunboats and silence those forts. Then we can clear these obstacles and proceed up river.”

That would prove to be more easily said than done. The river was now guarded by a series of forts named after a town at its mouth, Taku. These so called “Taku Forts” were stony outposts, each one with a crenulated wall where the barrels of rudimentary cannons would jut forth to threaten any ships attempting to pass on the river. It was here that the bluster and arrogance of the Westerners would meet its first test, at what became known as the 2nd Battle of the Taku Forts.

The British had the bulk of the naval units at hand, and so Admiral Hope, now succeeding Seymour, organized his flotillas. He had 11 gunboats at his disposal, small craft of 230 to 270 tons, and most having only two guns, one boat, the *Cormorant*, had four guns, and the best of the flotilla was the *Nimrod*, a six-gun sloop.

The ensuing engagement would give the Chinese every reason to think they could carry on with their game of delay, bluff, and subterfuge with the British. It was ill managed from the first, when Hope attempted to advance up

river at low tide, and could only get four gunboats over the sandbars, *Plover*, *Opossum*, *Lee*, and *Haughty* .

On the left bank of the river mouth, the “Great South Fort” was a long entrenchment, with three stone parapets and 58 guns of all sorts. Just beyond its southern end was another squarish fort with 10 guns. The matter at hand was to first find a way to silence the enemy guns, so as to permit the bluecoat Marines aboard the gunboats to land and have at them.

Using the word ‘land’ was a bit of a misnomer on two counts. Firstly, the approach to the forts, through the shallows of the river, would quickly become a slog through mud flats. So there was no place to “land,” and the act of attempting to do so would better be described as a wallow, and not a landing. If Hope were to get men over those wetlands to dryer land beyond, he would then be faced with rows of barbed wood piles and other entanglements as a barrier, and beyond this was a series of trenches or moats, the last of which was a deep flooded ditch. Only then could the troops attempt to scale the walls of the fort, and if they did get up, there would be hundreds of Chinese troops waiting for them there.

Against this defense, Hope would fling his leading four gunboats, with two guns each. The British howitzers were newer, more accurate, more powerful, but being outnumbered 58 to 8 was a rather severe handicap. The result was a foregone conclusion.

The day was fine and hot, the Chinese gunfire hotter, and very well ranged. They knew where the enemy boats would have to go, and had plenty of time to practice shooting right into the navigable channel.

Plover was one of the first to take hits, her commander, William Hector Rason, killed by shot from a cannon early on. The poor man was literally cut in two by a round, and died instantly. Admiral Hope’s Flag Lieutenant, George Douglas, took command of the gunboat, where the Admiral himself had been bold enough to plant his flag. It wasn’t long before he was also wounded by a splinter, and that wound, with the fact that *Plover* was being badly pounded, forced Hope to transfer his flag to the *Cormorant* , further back in the muddle of the other eight gunboats that had not managed to get over the bar.

Admiral Hope, weakened from loss of blood, turned command over to Captain Shadwell, who was wise enough to see the attack was folly, and ordered the gunboats to withdraw. The Chinese were firing at everything, and had already sunk the *Kestrel* . Then *Lee* had to be grounded to avoid going

down, and Shadwell could see that the naval engagement had been a disaster. So the little flotilla decided to turn the affair over to the Marines. In addition to their crews, there were 30 to 35 Marines on each gunboat, and so a force of 350 men was wallowed ashore on the left bank, beneath the parapet that had taken the most damage from the ill-fated gunboat sortie.

Of those 350 men, only about 50 would get through all the obstacles, over the flooded ditch, and actually make the attempt to scale the walls. Captain Shadwell would not make it, being wounded himself in the attempt. The Chinese had muskets, and would also rain down stones, hot pitch, and stinkpots on the exposed Marines below. It was soon clear that those 50 men were not going to take this fort, and so now the action became nothing more than an effort to get them safely back, and gather up as many of the wounded and fallen as possible.

The Barbarians had been stopped cold.

Two gunboats were sunk, another burned. 89 officers and men were killed, with 345 wounded. When the news reached Lord Elgin, he was incensed.

“How in the world? For us to be so roundly beaten by these Coolies and bearded Mandarins is an absolute insult! If this matter is to ever be resolved as it should, the Kingdom will have to get serious in the making of war there. I intend to go to Hong Kong Directly, and will wait until adequate forces are dispatched before taking any further action. British prestige is at stake here! This insult must be redressed.”

He might have used the word “avenged,” but would have even more cause to do so later. Lord Elgin’s demand for serious military muscle would be met. 12,600 troops would arrive from British India under command of Lieutenant General Sir Hope Grant. They were tough professional soldiers, the 44th Foot and 67th South Hampshires. To these, the French would add a fresh contingent of 8000 men under General Cousin de Montauban. The military would construct flat bottomed boats to get men over the shallows of the river, and rafts with landing planks. Soon Lord Elgin would lead that force into a maelstrom of wanton, rapacious violence.

It would begin on the 1st of August, 1860, and the action this time would mainly involve the landing of troops near the forts to then make an overland march and attack. General Grant was quite meticulous, a tall thin man, well-schooled, artistic, and an excellent musician as well. The men said he looked like a scrawny old lady, and often called him that, but he was a professional

officer, through and through, and he would make short work of the “3rd Battle of the Taku Forts.”

The Chinese, mostly commanded by the Chinese local Governor Hengfu now, had mustered a small army of 5000 infantry and 2000 horsemen to confront the Western Barbarians. This force was not able to stop the allied advance, and Grant then ordered fascines to be built to house and protect his artillery. They would bring six field pieces, three 8-inch mortars, four more 8-in guns (two being howitzers), a pair of 32 pounders, and six more of the newer “Armstrong Guns.” They would pound the forts into submission in a four-hour barrage on the 18th of August, 1860.

With the fall of those forts, Tianjin would fall soon after, and the considerable force that Lord Elgin had assembled would begin its march inland, towards Peking. Only then did the Chinese send ministers proposing peace talks. The Imperial Emissary first encountered Harry Parkes, the man who had first heard the grievances of the hapless master of the *Arrow*. Parkes had been complaining about the French.

“They dawdled about in that action,” he said, “unless it came to them planting a flag on some bastion or another. Then our own men went all out to see that we got there first. The French...” he shook his head. “Not one of them could tell you what they have come here to fight for. The result is that they have done nothing but hamper and delay us. Their commander grandstands, and his men do the same—full of pride it seems, but this is really nothing more than a lack of proper military restraint. Mark my words, if we take them inland with us, we’ll have more of the same.”

When the Chinese emissaries finally arrived, Parkes was immediately suspicious. Having a keen understanding of the Mandarins, it did not seem to him that the ministers were sufficiently empowered to conduct any agreement. In fact, he began to suspect that they were only sent to delay, buy time for the enemy to gather another army, or for the Emperor himself to leave his palaces in Peking and flee to other quarters.

Lord Elgin therefore resumed his advance on Peking, and reaching Tongzhou, 12 miles southeast of the Capitol, new Chinese ministers appeared and pleaded for talks to be held there in that city. Parkes was in the delegation sent to see to the preliminaries, with 25 other British men, and 13 French. The talks became a squabble over protocols, and the Chinese claimed the manner and deportment of the English was insulting. As the Allied delegation withdrew, it was set upon by Chinese soldiers, and all were taken

prisoner. Word soon came to Lord Elgin that they would only be released if the Europeans withdrew, and the following day, an army of 30,000 Chinese soldiers suddenly appeared. Parkes' suspicions had been completely correct.

Over the next week, it was war again, with two large battles fought. Once again, the Armstrong Guns and the martial prowess of the British and French prevailed over the Mongol infantry and horsemen, and by the 21st of September, the road to Peking lay open and undefended, and Lord Elgin advanced. Emperor Xianfeng fled to the north, beyond the Great Wall to palaces at Chengde. The Chinese had only one chip left on the table—the hostages they had seized, among them a correspondent for the London Times, and a personal friend of Lord Elgin, Thomas Bowlby.

The prisoners were tortured, an all too common occurrence where Westerners fell into the hands of “Barbarians.” Lord Elgin's reaction was pure template—revenge, particularly since the methods of torture used were quite cruel. The bodies of many were found so badly mutilated that they were unrecognizable. Parkes had been one of the very few that were released unharmed, and ever resentful of the Chinese authorities, he urged Lord Elgin to make reprisal.

Indeed, Lord Elgin would pen his report on the matter to the British government, writing that he was about to “mark by a solemn act of retribution, the horror and indignation with which we were inspired by the perpetration of a great crime.” He would take his indignation to the famous *Yuanmingyuan*, the sprawling garden estates of the Emperor in Peking. The Europeans thought they were the Emperor's “Summer Palaces,” but that was not true. The palaces in Peking were his primary residence, and the center of his government, and those in Chengde where he had fled were his real summer retreat.

Yuanmingyuan was rumored to be a place of legendary splendor, miles of gardens, where pathways meandered along the shores of serene, tree shaded lakes, through flowerbeds, past splendid fountains and sculpture. Then there were gilded halls, ornate reception rooms, elegant residences, opulent museums, libraries, amazing galleries adorned with paintings, and fine examples of artwork in the tens of thousands. There was gold, silver, precious stones of every sort, and delicate porcelain. It was the collective artistry of an entire people and culture, all concentrated in that one place. Lord Elgin knew that he had to make some demonstration here, an act so audacious that it would forever intimidate and humble the Chinese, and shock them so deeply

that they would never again give challenge to the mighty British Empire.

There was the *Yuanmingyuan*, and he had a secret interest in the place. So it was with some misgiving that he learned what had happened when the French troops scaled the 15 foot walls and entered the palaces. Looting had long been a common practice for victorious armies, and if ever there could be found anything that so completely defined the essence of available “loot,” the *Yuanmingyuan* was the epitome of that. There were hundreds of enchanted places there, with exotic names like the Pavilion of Blessed Shade, Pavilion of Forgotten Desires, the Halls of Virtue, Longevity, Serenity, Magnanimity, and the Pagoda of a Thousand Treasures. That one word described it all to the European soldiers when they first looked upon it—*treasures* . They would soon become other words—loot, swag, plunder, booty.

It began as a simple way of rewarding a few chosen officers. The French General Montauban was properly awed by the palaces, and he placed guards at key buildings to prevent what was now about to happen. Yet he made one mistake, allowing his senior officers to find and take one object as a reward and memento of their campaign, and that was the match that lit the fire. When the rank and file saw what these officers had, they passed a sleepless night outside the walls, and then many began to slip away to find treasures of their own.

This treasure hunt soon escalated to wholesale looting, where even the guards posted to protect the artwork began to take part. The soldiers rampaged through the galleries, some finding and donning the silk robes of the Emperor himself. They paraded about in mad dances, tore down tapestries, curtains, silkscreens and paintings. They took the precious Ming porcelain vases and simply threw them to the ground, smashing sculptured jade ornaments and other art to pieces. It was an insane orgy of destruction; a madness, a furious rampage, utter mayhem that went on for three days. Even the Emperor’s Pekinese dog was seized, later presented to Queen Victoria and appropriately named “Looty.”

When Lord Elgin finally arrived to see what they had done on the afternoon of October 7th, 1860, he was aghast, immediately giving orders that the remaining artwork should be rounded up and collected in a secure place.

It’s here, he thought, somewhere, but how in the world will I ever find the place now after all this pillaging? Father was quite specific. I must get to the area near the European styled palaces. Having failed in Egypt, I simply

cannot let this moment pass without finding it. But the place is a disaster! This is criminal! No wonder the Chinese think of us as barbarians.

There before him, was “everything in the way of sculpture, medals and curious marbles” that he could possibly imagine. And none of it had to be found by first suffering the labors of “assiduous and indefatigable excavation.”

What in the world was he thinking? What had his father, the fabled 7th Earl of Elgin and procurer of the “curious marbles” of the Acropolis confided to him? Indeed, before he arrived at Hong Kong, the 8th Earl of Elgin had made a particular point to stop off in Cairo, where he insisted on touring the Great Pyramids. Then, at night, he made a secret visit to the Sphinx, standing between its massive paws, where a stele had once been erected—the “Dream Stele” of the ancient Pharaoh, Thutmose IV.

He stood there, not knowing what those hieroglyphs meant, for they would not be translated for another 20 years. It was, in part, an appeal by the father for his son to restore the sad condition of that monument, as if the original writer had hoped to make his son the caretaker of that ancient stone sculpture.

Lord Elgin would later write of that moment: *“The mystical light and deep shadows cast by the moon, gave to it an intensity which I cannot attempt to describe. To me it seemed to look, earnest, searching, but unsatisfied. For a long time, I remained transfixed, endeavoring to read the meaning conveyed by this wonderful eye of the Sphinx...”*

Strangely, Lord Elgin was there in Egypt only because of a similar charge delivered to him by his own father. That was why the Earl was so keen to survey these ancient ruins, as if searching for something hidden there long ago, but frustrated when he could not find it. Now, standing amid the smashed and littered artwork of the Old “Summer Palace” in Peking, he was equally intent upon fulfilling his quest. *“We have the one,”* his father had told him. *“We must now find the others.”*

Like father, like son.... James Bruce eventually found his way to one place within those sprawling estates, through the “Temple of Heaven,” past the “Hall of Eternal Ages,” into a small garden in the “House of Endless Consciousness,” and there it was, just where his Father had told him it would be, one small object that had been overlooked by the hordes of looting soldiers.

“I would like a great many things that the palace contains,” Elgin had said

to General Montauban, “but I am not a thief.” No, he was not a thief. He was a collector, and he had come here, riding the currents of political conflict and discontent, to find a thing that needed to be collected.

He sighed, closing his eyes, and tucked it away in the pocket of his greatcoat. With this in hand, he thought, the entire campaign is a complete success. Now then... The Chinese... Yes, this was all quite regrettable, the destruction and looting. It will reflect very badly on us, and yet, it may not be enough of an example of our retribution. It may take something more.

He looked around, seeing hundreds of buildings, mostly constructed with cedar, and came to a decision he had been deliberating for several days. A few days later, the Old “Summer Palace” would be burned. No one else would ever be able to retrace his footsteps and find this place again, he thought. Now that I have what I came for, nothing else matters, so let it burn....

Part XII

Balance of Terror

“I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

—Albert Einstein

Chapter 34

Ivan Volkov was confused. Nothing appeared as it should. He had reached Kansk, where he thought he might be able to get information on what was happening. The city itself looked to be half its proper size. The massive weapons arsenal north of the river was gone, along with the Naval Marine Cadet school on its southern edge. The military barracks facilities were missing, and all the buildings he could see looked antiquated. There was no sign of modernity, no restaurants offering fast food, billboards, advertisements of any kind. His thought was to find a military plane and get to some safe location before a missile found the place, but there was no airfield! Kansk West was gone, along with the older civil airfield south of the city. It was as if he was in an entirely different place, yet the twisting flow of the river was the one thing that was unmistakable. This was certainly Kansk, yet like nothing he had ever seen.

His mind briefly considered the possibility that the city had already been struck, but he could see no outward signs of damage. The people, also oddly dressed, seemed to be fussing over the arrival of a few old cars, and asking a passerby what was happening, he was told the race cars had arrived. Perplexed and confused, he made one last attempt to locate his security team. Where could they have gone? But when he broadcast his message on the designated navy short range channel, no one answered.

Then he realized he had been a fool. The technology built into his service jacket had been born from new small unit equipment designed for the Russian Marines. It had been designed as a field jacket, running on solar power from light sensitive threads in the outer lining, with a thin flexible battery pack the was infinitely rechargeable, and special computer chips embedded in water tight pouches in the lining, wrapped with a Kevlar like protective shell that was also shielded from EMP pulse.

The jacket had many capabilities. In addition to short range radio, it could also store enormous amounts of data, and also had both GPS and cellular connection capability. Originally designed to link field operatives in a team, it could also broadcast a signal that might reach any other field jacket in range, a kind of ping that would then be answered by that suit to indicate the presence of a friendly operative in the immediate vicinity. In the heat of the

moment, he had only used his radio to call for his guards. Now he settled down and got a grip on himself. Use the damn suit!

He reached to the left inside jacket lining, moved a pocket flap, and there was the locator button, which he squeezed between thumb and forefinger to activate the suit ping. The results were almost immediate. His jacket broadcast its IFF signal, and then reported any returning ping it received.

“*One contact*,” a woman’s synthesized voice on his collar speaker reported the results seconds later, but that only deepened the mystery. One contact? That was reassuring, but where were the rest of his men? He tried his radio set one more time.

“Team Seven, this is team leader. Come in team seven, this is Volkov—over.”

* * *

“Well I’ll be a monkey’s ass,” Orlov said aloud. Volkov! This was the man that Fedorov seemed so worried about, that nosey intelligence officer that was inspecting the ship when they finally got back to Vladivostok. What was he doing here? Could it be the same man, or was the name just a coincidence? And what was this talk about Team Seven?

Now Orlov looked around him, suddenly wary. This place was the same run-down hovel that he had seen when they arrived on that zeppelin. Fedorov had been keen to find this Mironov fellow, and the two of them had some kind of disagreement, then he simply rounded up the whole team and wanted to go up those stairs to the second floor. In fact, they could be up there right now. But how did this Volkov get here? Was this some part of the mission that Fedorov never explained?

Sookin Sim! He swore inwardly . I’d better check upstairs first.

He made his way up the main stairway, hoping to find the whole team waiting for him on the second floor. Fedorov had once told him something crazy about this place, about that back stairway as well. When the Captain had revealed the true nature of their mission, it was quite a shock., and he was still running all that over in his mind....

“We’ve moved,” said Fedorov. “We aren’t in the same time as before. That event out there is the Tunguska Event. This is 1908, and just a day or so after that thing fell back there on the 30th of June.”

“1908?” Orlov gave him a blank look.

“So you see why I didn’t want to get into it with Symenko,” said Fedorov. “As for you two, you need to know the truth. It’s 1908, and probably the first of July, the day after Tunguska. I’ve changed our heading and we’re going to Ilanskiy, just east of Kansk. There’s someone there I have to.... Speak with.”

It took a while for things to get through Orlov’s thick skull. He blinked, looking at Troyak. “Who’s the man you need to see there?” he had asked.

“Mironov. Alright, I’d better tell you both this, and it will be a lot to swallow. It all started with you, Chief, and you remember it very well—when you decided to jump ship. Well I came after you to get you home again, and you, Sergeant, came right along with me.”

So he told them, the whole knotted tale of what had happened when he and Troyak first got to Ilanskiy. Orlov grinned at times, nodding his head when a part of the story included him. He had all that inside his head now, clear memories of everything. He could still see those bulging eyes and purple lips as he choked the breath out of Commissar Molla.

“This young man,” Fedorov finished. “He was going by the name Mironov back then—right now, in 1908. Later he would change that name and take another—Kirov.” He folded his arms watching them both closely.

“Sergei Kirov?” said Orlov. “The man we named our ship after?”

“That’s correct.”

“You came all this way to speak with him? Well what in God’s name for?”

“It was going to be more than that,” said Fedorov. “This was something that Karpov and I worked through for a very long time. This whole situation—back in 1942—well it’s my fault. You see, I told Mironov something, opened my big mouth, and I let something slip. That changed everything. It set up that whole crazy world, the war we were fighting, the Orenburg Federation, all of it.”

“Mironov set that up? I thought Volkov did all that.”

“Yes, he did, but he might not have ever succeeded if I had kept my mouth shut. When we’re this far back in time, any little slip can have major consequences to the events that follow. One little slip could end up becoming something very big. Well, I made a mistake, and now I have to correct it—at least I’m going to try.... I told him something, and that changed everything.”

“What was it?” Orlov remembered how curious he had been.

“I told him how he would die—not exactly—but I gave him a warning about Leningrad, about the day he would be assassinated.”

“*Sookin Sym!*” Orlov gave him a wide grin. “Good job, Fedorov. It looks like he took your advice, because he lived, and he’s a damn sight better than Stalin.”

“Yes,” Fedorov said quietly, “I suppose he is.”

“So, you want to make sure he gets the message,” Orlov guessed. “You want to speak with him again and leave nothing to chance. I Understand now. But Fedorov, how do we get back after this? Have you worked that out yet?”

Orlov remembered the anguished look on Fedorov’s face.

“Get back?” said Fedorov slowly. “Well, the stairway will be right there, won’t it? The last time I went up, it delivered me right back to the time I left—1942—the very same day, only a few hours later. The good Sergeant here said he had been looking for me for some time, though for me, it was only a matter of minutes that passed. I think that stairway works like that. You get right back to where you started, as if you were walking a circle. It always takes you back to where you began.”

“Only this time we didn’t come by the stairs,” Orlov remembered how he caught that. “We got here on this damn airship,” he said. “Will it still work?”

“We can try,” said Fedorov glumly. “We all go together, right up those stairs.”

And that was what they tried. Now they were all gone, except for me, thought Orlov. Even as he tramped up the main stairway, his ear still listening for any further signals on his service jacket, he realized this was probably a stupid and fruitless move, but he had to be certain.

He reached the upper landing. “Fedorov? Troyak? Anybody there?” This stairway did nothing—no magical shift in time.

A young woman stuck her head out of one door, one of the maids that had been cleaning the rooms. This was bullshit, he thought. All the others were gone, and here he was, still stuck in 1908, all by himself.

No.

He was no alone. The plaintive call he had heard on his service jacket told him that well enough. Volkov! This was the man that had bothered them on the ship, then Fedorov claimed he followed him all along the Siberian rail line, and caused a great deal of trouble. It’s the same guy who started all this crap about the Orenburg Federation. Ivan Volkov!”

“Son-of-a-bitchkovitch!” Orlov swore in English this time, the way he had heard some Americans do it once. How did Volkov get back here?

Two plus two eventually added up to four in Orlov’s mind. It was clear

that Volkov could not have come on a Zeppelin like the team did. So there was only one way he could have appeared here—that damn stairway! But why? What was he doing here? What was this crap about Team seven.

Yes.... Fedorov once told me that Volkov had been after him, and that he had a security team with him. I can't remember everything, but it's clear that someone is here, in 1908, and that he's broadcasting on a service jacket. Fedorov is long gone, off to who knows where, and all the other marines. It's just me here now, and Ivan Volkov. What should I do?

Fedorov's words were darkly in his mind again... *'When we're this far back in time, any little slip can have major consequences to the events that follow. One little slip could end up becoming something very big....'*

Any little slip.

Well, Volkov was a damn sight more than that! He was one hell of a major fuck-up—right here, and right now. This is how he got back here, he reasoned. He had to come down those stairs.

Orlov moved down the hall, seeing the door at the top of the back stairway landing. He peered out the window, seeing the rail yard was empty now. Everyone had followed those silly race car men west towards Kansk. He squinted, looking this way and that for any sign of Volkov, but he could see no one else, just an old woman dragging a child behind here on the other side of the rail yard. He was standing right there, at the top of those mysterious stairs, as if he thought Fedorov, Troyak and all the other Marines would come up any second. He would even be glad to see Zykov with his shit-eating grin again, but all was dark and silent.

If Fedorov knew about this he would blow a gasket, he thought. One little slip, he says, but Volkov raises hell here. He starts his own goddamn country! That traitor fights against Sergei Kirov for decades. He even goes so far as to side with Hitler.

So what do I do about this?

He had two choices now, and plain as the two stairways leading down from this second floor. One was the back stairway, wrapped in the shadow of uncertainty. He could try that again, and maybe this time it would work. He had no notion that the direction he came from mattered. Fedorov had gathered the men in the dining room below, and they were all to go up, but in Orlov's mind that was mere happenstance. So he could try again, and he might just get to the other end of his circle. Fedorov said it worked like that. You get back where you came from. Yes? Clearly the whole team got

through... somewhere. He would have to get somewhere as well.

The other choice was the main stairway, and as far as he knew, there was no magic there. It should just take him back down to the lobby, where that old man and his daughter were fussing about. He couldn't blame them for that, what, with all of the Marines tramping about the inn. If he went that way, down the main stair, he'd likely stay right where he was—at least in time—and right where Volkov was....

Yes, he thought. "If I try the back stairs again, and it works, I might get through to find Fedorov, and then he can decide what to do. Yes? He's a whole lot smarter than I am when it comes to this time business, and he'd certainly want to know what I've learned about Volkov. Then again.... If I do get somewhere that way, what about Volkov? I already know he's going to cause a shit storm here, but he hasn't had the time to get started yet, has he. What was this crap about Team seven? Could he have other men with him.

He suddenly knew how he could find out, reaching inside his service jacket for the same secure pocket flap and squeezing the ping button. He would get the same message that Volkov got.

"One Contact."

Perhaps I should not have done that, thought Orlov. Now Volkov will know that someone pinged him... In fact... He pinched off his collar Mike. "Ping reception log," he said. "State time of most recent reception."

"One ping received. 09:20 hours."

Orlov looked at his watch. That was no more than five minutes ago, and so he knew it had not come from Fedorov. They were all long gone....

So, the bastard knows I'm here... No... He knows *someone* is here, and with a service jacket, but there's no GPS here now, and therefore no way to get a precise location on any ping contact. I know he's here, and he knows he's got company, because his jacket will log my ping too. But I'm willing to bet he would think I'm one of his men—Team Seven... Well, they don't seem to be here either, at least not within maximum range of a jacket signal. So what do I do here?

Do I try that back stairway again, and see if I can find Fedorov? What if I get somewhere else? It's risky, and I'll be leaving that skunk Volkov here to do all his mischief.

Orlov scratched his head thinking. Then he took a deep breath, and decided.

Chapter 35

“This is quite astounding,” said Hitler. “I only signed the order for design of this weapon six months ago, and largely at the urging of the navy because of the trouble with these naval rockets the enemy was using. Now we have a weapon that could win this war! It will certainly give the British fits. Yes? Here we have a decisive weapon, and one that we can produce with very little resources. Suspend the entire Naval building program. Listen Speer.... I want you to accelerate this program as much as possible. I know we decided that tank production was to receive top priority, but I want this moved up. Rewrite the order to give the A-4 equal priority. Then comes aircraft production. But anything related to the A-4 must be kept in complete secrecy. Use only good German workers there. If the enemy discovers what we are up to, they will risk everything to try and stop us. It is already bad enough that Peenemünde was hit last night, so the British certainly know we are up to something there.”

“The briefing, was, in part, intended to assure you that the program was not seriously hurt,” said Speer. “They hit the sleeping and living quarters with their first wave. Unfortunately, Doctor Thiel and Chief Engineer Walther were reported missing. They are still digging for them in one of the air raid trenches, and we hope they will be found soon.”

“It should not have been hurt at all! We must triple the anti-aircraft defense there, and get more fighter groups. After what I have seen in that film, I am convinced these weapons can win the war, particularly if we can get more warheads of the kind that our Zeppelin attack delivered to London. If it is necessary to move the production facility elsewhere, then do so, but it must be well hidden, and deep underground. We must not keep all our eggs in one basket.” Hitler smiled, and it was a genuine emotion born of the enthusiasm he had for this new program. He was ebullient, his mood elevated, a new energy emanated from him and he seemed more alive than he had in weeks.

“I have selected a new location for the production plant, at Mittelwerk,” said Speer. “In fact, it has already been set up, and work will commence shortly.”

“Good,” said Hitler. “Very good. Now... what can you tell me about

Nachtfeuer?” That was the code word the Germans had now given to their most secret weapons development program—*Nightfire* .

“It is progressing,” said Speer. “I am told we now know how the prototypes we captured work. The problem is getting enough of the required materials, and I have already established a production plant. Nikolaus and Günter are seeing to the matter.”

Speer was referring to the Industrial Physicist Nikolaus Riehl and Chemist Günther Wirths, and by extension, their effort to set up a plant at Oranienburg to produce reactor grade Uranium in high-purity uranium oxide. It had been decided that even in private conversation, no specific reference would ever be made to these materials, or any methods used to create them, and Speer had not even told Hitler the secret location of this plant.

“Speer, can you imagine it? Once we get the A-4, and finally complete production on the required warheads, then we have a weapon that can rain hellfire on the enemy, day or night, and one he will be completely powerless to stop.”

“What about their own rocket programs?”

“A good point,” said Hitler. “Yet aside from these few encounters at sea with British capital ships, we have not seen anything more of these weapons.”

“I’m told the British were using them to defend London,” said Speer.

“If they were, then their deployment was a pathetic failure. I have not received a single report indicating that any of our planes have been hit or shot down by a rocket weapon. Strange... They were so lethal when deployed at sea. One would think the coastline of Britain would be bristling with rocket launching stations by now, but we have no evidence that any such program is even underway in England. Well, that will not be the case here. Tell me about the *Sturmvogel* . When can I expect my *Stormbirds*?”

“Very soon,” said Speer. “There was some delay due to the necessity of obtaining the right silicon, aluminum and ferritic heat-resistant steel. Temperatures can reach as high as 1700 degrees Celsius. We also wanted to extend the operational lifespan from an initial 25 hours to 125 hours before major overhaul and maintenance is required. We are very close. They moved from simple prototype production to a larger test flight series that will be very close to the final production specifications. Pilot training is coming along nicely.”

“And we must have rockets for that,” said Hitler. “I want to show them

that two can play this game. We have seen nothing since these naval incidents, but that does not mean they do not have these weapons programs. They could unveil a weapon any time, and we must be ready to answer. I am told that when Gneisenau died, the enemy may have used a weapon very much like the one we tested over London. In fact, it may have been the very same thing. We already know they were conducting secret trials in the deep South Atlantic. Thankfully, *Kaiser Wilhelm* interrupted their party with his raid on the hen house down there, and he brought home two fine chickens! At least the navy does something right once in a while.”

“You know Raeder will not be happy to learn we are cancelling all his planned production.”

“Then let him weep over his beer,” said Hitler. “He delivered on his promise to control the Black Sea, but sat idle when the Allies came for Sardinia. Just when I think he might be useful, he does nothing.”

“I am told his ships were in need of fuel, and could not sortie. The same can be said for the Italians. They have been using their battleships as nothing more than floating fuel bunkers to service a few destroyers and cruisers out of La Spezia.”

“Good for nothing,” said Hitler, “just like their army. Operation *Alaric* will transition to *Achse* in due course. Mussolini’s days are numbered, and it is likely that he will lose his grip on things in Rome within weeks. So I have ordered Rommel to accelerate his preparations for Italy as well. If they think they will simply waltz in and take the place, they are mistaken. All my Generals hound me for divisions, Speer. They have no idea of the burdens I carry. These developments in the Mediterranean forced me to build three new armies for Italy and the Balkans. The British and Americans will undoubtedly plan a new invasion soon. Ah, Speer, wouldn’t it be marvelous if we had the A-4 ready in time to stop them?”

“It would,” said Speer, “but I cannot promise that just yet. We are close to the final production model. Tests are very promising. As for *Nachtfeuer*, I will keep you advised. But remember, we still have the second enemy prototype.”

“It must be kept safe,” said Hitler. “They undoubtedly know we have it. They may even believe we used it on them over London. One would think that they would have mounted an immediate reprisal, which is why I ordered the ministries in Berlin to be dispersed to underground bunkers. It would be a terrible shame, Speer, if all your wonderful architecture were destroyed by

this weapon. It is already bad enough that we have their bombers to contend with. I must admit, I made a terrible mistake with the Z Plan before the war. Goring was correct. I should have put far more resources into the development of the Luftwaffe instead of Raeder's battleships. Even Doenitz is having difficulties now."

"Oh? What is his situation? We have tried to keep resources for U-Boat production flowing at good levels."

"Yes, but the Allies have made many technical advances in the Atlantic. Doenitz sunk 120 ships in March of this year—that's 700,000 tons, and we lost only 12 U-boats in that month. Things fell off in April—only 64 kills and 15 U-boats lost. Then it all fell apart in May. We got only 58 ships that month, but lost 41 U-boats. That is more than we lost in the entire year of 1941! Doenitz even lost his son on U-954, and I sent him my personal condolences. After such losses. Doenitz has pulled back to rethink his methods and tactics. Hopefully we can reverse the downward trend, but you see, this is just one of many things I must contend with. The losses in Tunisia were keenly felt, and the Russians have been particularly aggressive of late. We must reverse the situation, and for that I need tanks and aircraft. Keep them coming, Speer. Put everything we save from Raeder's building program into the effort. Now we need fighters, bombers, heavy panzers, not do-nothing battleships, cruisers and destroyers. If a ship is ready to be commissioned, and I mean within 30 days, no more, then work may proceed. Otherwise, I want the steel for other purposes. We must make sure *Nachtfeuer* and *Sturmvogel* get top priority. This war is far from over."

* * *

"Admiral?" There was real emotion in Tovey's voice when he heard Volsky on the other end of that secure radio channel. He still remembered that hard day when the Germans put that shell on the bridge of HMS *Invincible*, and very nearly decapitated the Royal Navy in the process. Tovey had been blown right off his feet, and it was only the intercession of Admiral Volsky that saved his life. When they handed Tovey the last remnants of Volsky's possessions, his service jacket and cap, he remembered also what he had found there. Losing Volsky had been a very hard blow, but now, there he was, Lazarus, risen from the dead, his voice as clear and firm as it always was.

“I know this must be somewhat difficult for you to understand,” said Volsky. “I must tell you that I am not even sure I know how I came to be here. It has something to do with all this arcane science that first took hold of my ship in the North Atlantic, and set us against one another.”

“Yes,” said Tovey. “That is all a very dim memory for me now, though I can still recall it if I put my mind to it. I remember how we stood together on that islet off the southern tip of Spain, well met. And I’ll never forget the first time I set foot on your ship, seeing the demon that had haunted my operations first hand, and feeling it underfoot. Quite extraordinary. I have been told, mostly by your Mister Fedorov, that all these things are remnants of a past life—something to do with that paradox he kept warning us all about.”

“Yes, I cannot quite sort it all out myself, but it is all up here in my head.” Volsky paused briefly. “If you can believe it, Admiral Tovey, I was sitting quietly at my desk in Severomorsk one morning. Then, the next thing I knew, I was aboard one of our submarines. Something happened in that instant—I know not what exactly—but there I was, and with my head full of things I was certain I had never experienced in the life I had led, and yet they were so completely convincing as memories, so clear and defined. Admiral... There are worlds within worlds, within worlds. How else to explain my presence here now?”

“So it seems,” said Tovey. “Mister Fedorov talks about them at times, does he not? At least he tried to explain it all to me once.”

“He does. Meridians, that’s what he calls them. According to him, there was once a single line of causality. He calls it the Prime Meridian, but apparently that accident in the Norwegian Sea that sent my ship here was quite profound. I knew, and from the moment I first put a missile on the first aircraft, that I was doing something that would make an irrevocable change to the flow of those events. Lord knows, Mister Fedorov has agonized over it ever since. We changed everything, and for that I am truly sorry. Now, here we find ourselves trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. That is a figure in one of your English nursery rhymes. Yes?”

“Indeed,” said Tovey. “Perhaps it is far too late for that. All the King’s horses and all the King’s men, couldn’t put Humpty together again, and that may be true of our situation.”

“Yet we still try,” said Volsky. “We have come all the way north again to the Sea of Okhotsk, and Karpov has arranged for us to go on a little Zeppelin ride. We are going to Ilanskiy, and I think Mister Fedorov has already told

you the significance of that.”

“He has,” said Volsky. “But what is your plan?”

“Something to do with all this shifting about in time,” said Volsky. “Fedorov believes that since we are most responsible for what has happened, yes, even for the construction of that ship you are sitting on now, then if we all put our minds together, and focus on a single purpose, we might just change things again. We tried that here, but things are too broken; too scattered. Then Karpov convinced us that the only way we would have a chance is to leave this time, and travel back to 1908. Things happened there that set a great deal in motion—the least of which is the breakup of my nation, and the rise of the Orenburg Federation. We are going to try and take matters into our own hands, and change that.”

“Change it? How? In what way?”

“That remains to be seen, but in that time, we will have a great deal of leverage on the years that follow. We have discussed it at length, and the business surrounding the rise of Sergei Kirov is very complex. We might not be able to find him back there, but we do think we might catch Volkov before he has a chance to wreak havoc on the history of our revolution.”

“I see... Well, this is quite remarkable, and quite surprising to hear. What do you expect?”

“We aren’t sure, but if we could get that man, then much would change. I have no way of knowing how it might occur. In fact, it seems impossible to me, but then again, my very presence here is something equally astounding. I just wanted to warn you of what we are going to attempt. I don’t know that it would even matter, but it may be that the things you remember will begin to fade, even if they are sure memories now. Things that once were, but cannot be because of something we do in the past, may be like a candle in the wind. Some of my recollections are like that, fading away, day by day.”

“Well you have certainly stolen my thunder,” said Tovey. “I had another matter to relate to Mister Fedorov, and a request, but I suppose it will have to wait.”

“What was it?”

“It concerns that problem we had over London in February.”

“Ah, yes,” said Volsky. “I was told something about that—most alarming.”

“Indeed,” said Tovey. “To think they have such a weapon is more than unsettling. It’s got the whole government here in a tizzy. We took a crack at

their development center, and threw over 500 bombers at the place, but I'm not sure we had any success."

"And your request has something to do with this?"

"It does," said Tovey. "I suppose it goes along the lines of fighting fire with fire..." He let that hang there, and Volsky knew exactly what he meant.

"That is a very grave matter," said Volsky.

"I fully understand that, but this was our reasoning, if such madness can be sanitized by claiming it was born of reasoned deliberation at all. That attack on London was utterly chilling. If the Germans are getting close to deployment on any scale for this weapon, then we face utter disaster. Now, I'm not sure if your mission could change all of that, but in this war, here and now, we think we've found their nest for this program, and if we could get it with one fell blow, the scientists, materials, facilities, prototypes and all, then we might put this fire out before it becomes a conflagration that could consume this entire world. If they get this weapon, it will certainly make our chances of winning this war a very dim prospect. We simply must find a way to stop them. So I thought of you, your ship, and the weapons you have told me about on more than one occasion."

"Fighting fire with fire," said Volsky. "How very true that would be, but also quite terrible."

"Yes, we do understand that. Yet think of one other possible outcome here. If we were to do this, we might then also make a back-channel communication to Hitler that offers a truce, at least insofar as that weapon is concerned. After all, we still have an understanding concerning things like Mustard gas and the like. If Hitler thinks we have these weapons, and the will to use them, then he might be persuaded to embrace such an agreement. It could matter a very great deal. In fact, it could be the single most important mission of this war."

Chapter 36

It loomed in the sky, a massive presence over the bay, as long as the ship itself. *Kirov* had sailed north, moving well out into the Pacific to make the journey, until it finally arrived at Petropavlovsk, on the western shores of Kamchatka. This was the harbor that Karpov had taken from the Japanese in

the early stages of his Plan 7 offensive, and now it served as his principle Pacific port, at least in the warmer months while it remained ice free.

Geography was never kind to mother Russia. She could never find good warm water ports that opened on the major oceans. Even Vladivostok, which Karpov had vowed to regain, was ice-bound in the winter. Ever since Peter the Great, Russia has sought to expand her borders to reach those deep blue waters where the warm currents keep ports ice free, but she had always been blocked. This time, it was Imperial Japan in the way, roosting on Dailan, Port Arthur, and now even controlling Vladivostok.

Karpov's war with the Japanese had lapsed into a long stalemate on Sakhalin Island. While *Kirov* was away, the Japanese could ferry an endless stream of reinforcements to the troops holding the line there. With so many Siberian troops now fighting for Sergei Kirov, Karpov, the younger, simply could not build up enough ground strength to overcome the Japanese and push south. The best he could do was hold the ground he had taken by surprise. As for the remainder of Plan 7, it had ground to a halt under the weight of logistics. It was simply not possible to support an army capable of moving overland from the Sea of Okhotsk to Vladivostok. With few or no roads to move supplies and heavy equipment, everything had to be done by the airship fleet, and it simply wasn't large enough to support an army capable of posing any real threat to the objective.

So Plan 7 became a point of honor. Karpov had taken Kamchatka, half of Sakhalin, and he had held those territories. In spite of his repeated offers to invite American bombers to his new sovereign territory, the region was too foggy in the warm months, and too cold and ice otherwise. There was only a narrow window for good operations, in the spring and autumn, and that simply wasn't good enough.

The younger Karpov had become the *de facto* Premier while the Siberian was away fencing with the Japanese at sea. He had then focused his attention on securing Omsk, and expanding the perimeter in that region. Though the German operation in the Caucasus forced Volkov to transfer many divisions from that front, Orenburg still had just enough to hold the Siberians at bay, and continued to float peace proposals to try and get itself out of the dilemma it was in now, with enemies on every frontier. When Volkov broke with Germany, Hitler pressed the Japanese to begin putting pressure on Orenburg's far eastern frontiers. They had mounted a few excursions, but Japan had no real interest in expanding in that direction, and frankly, the

Empire needed no new enemies.

Kirov had come to Petropavlovsk with *Kazan* , largely to get to safe waters. Radar equipped Zeppelins now made regular patrols out beyond the Kuriles, and they could serve as early warning pickets for any move by Admiral Kita's little fleet. For their part, after meeting with Yamamoto, Kita had been persuaded to sail home to Japan, through the Bungo Channel, into the Inland Sea and on up to lay anchor at Hiroshima Bay, northwest of Kure. There they appeared like any other ship out in the bay, while Admiral Nagano planned to meet with Yamamoto and the interlopers from another time, to decide how they would be utilized in Japan's war with the United States.

Now Karpov, the Siberian, was ready to consider options for their fateful mission to 1908. The difficulties had all been identified. They knew there would be a narrow window if they tried to reach the place on their own. Volsky was reluctant to make the journey himself, Fedorov would always have to arrive days after Sergei Kirov had taken the train east to Irkutsk. Karpov's "service window" was very narrow, but one man, Tyrenkov, could undertake the mission without these limitations and restrictions.

Tyrenkov had already traversed the staircase, reaching a place and time where he had been able to identify Ivan Volkov, and so it was decided that he would become the messenger of Death for this mission, with a select group of the Marines who called themselves exactly that—the Black Death.

While this plan was being finalized, Admiral Volsky approached the group with news of the most unusual request put forward by Tovey.

"It was so good to hear his voice again," said Volsky. "I can still clearly see his face in my mind, though I must admit there is still one corner of this old head that knows I have never met the man, at least in that life. How strange this all is. Now then... Here is what Tovey asks of us, and it comes directly from their Mister Churchill."

Volsky related the fear that had gripped the British government after the stunning attack over London, and with a weapon unlike any other that had been used in this war.

"I still cannot understand how the Germans could have deployed such a weapon," said the Siberian. "What could we have done to change the time line on their development of Atomic weapons?" He looked at Fedorov, but the Captain had no ideas on that.

"The fact remains," said Volsky, "that they have at least developed a

small prototype weapon, and that attack on London was its first deployment. We have already seen the early introduction of the Panzerfaust, and we all know why. Kinlan's appearance has strongly spurred development of new and better armor on the German side, and the use of our missiles at sea may have had a similar effect. Look what the Germans did in the Black Sea. They have already used a rudimentary version of their V-1 cruise missile, and the Fritz-X radio controlled glide bomb. Now the British are terrified that the next raid over London will hit a much more important target. They have had to disperse their entire governmental infrastructure."

"So now Churchill wants us to nuke them?"

"That sounds harsh," said Volsky, "and I suppose it is, but here is what they proposed. They want us to strike the German special weapons development center at Peenemünde. Apparently, they attempted to bomb the place, but without satisfactory results. Now they are afraid the Germans will soon disperse their special weapons to avoid losing key assets in one place like that, so, and somewhat ironically, time is of the essence."

"Operation *Hydra* used over 500 bombers," said Fedorov. "That happened a few months early, as it didn't take place until August on our original meridian. They won't try another operation on that scale again for nearly a year, in July of 1944 with Mission 481. That sent almost 400 B-17's escorted by nearly 300 fighters, and it still failed to shut the place down. Face it, these massed bombing raids just don't have the precision to strike key targets, and we don't have the missile range—or the missiles—to commit to such an operation with a conventional attack."

"Well," said Karpov, "unless we want to try and sneak in right off Bremerhaven, we'd have to be well out in the North Sea to avoid being found and attacked by German aircraft. That could be dealt with, but again, at a cost in SAM's that we don't really want to expend. That would put us 500 kilometers from the target. We would have to use one of the long-range *Zircons*, and yet, consider the cost to us in strategic striking power. We have only two special warheads left... Unless you have something in the sea chest, Captain Gromyko."

"Gromyko gave Karpov a look, but said nothing."

"Should we use that kind of power on an attack like this?"

"Here is what the British propose," said Volsky. "London was already attacked, so they know the Germans have a working bomb. That alone should chill our blood. Even if we run a successful mission to eliminate Volkov, this

is still a far more serious threat. Remember, we are staying here. This is our war, and we will have to face this question sooner or later if the German weapons program is not stopped.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov. “Right now, everything is largely in one nest. Their project started September 1st of 1939. They have been working on getting enriched uranium, heavy water production, and uranium isotope separation. That was their main lagging point, getting the fuel they needed.”

“They obviously solved the problem,” said Volsky. “Mister Churchill now wants to make a most convincing demonstration. The British think the Germans may already suspect that London has the bomb. After all, there was that incident involving the detonation at sea during our pursuit of the German fleet.”

Karpov eyed Gromyko. At least this was one detonation that could not be laid at his feet. “Alright,” he said. “Our intelligence has determined that the Germans do, in fact, believe that the British have a weapon. Yet Hitler was bold enough to use his bomb the first chance he got! Our Mister Tyrenkov had determined that this was most likely a prototype.”

“So the British want to show Hitler that two can play this deadly game,” said Volsky. “Tovey said that Churchill believes this attack against Peenemünde can be most helpful, and not just by eliminating the German special weapons programs. He is planning to send a communication to Berlin after that attack, and state that it was in direct reprisal for the raid on London.”

“Tit for tat,” said Karpov.

“Precisely,” said Volsky. “But Churchill will also make a proposal that if the Germans refrain from any further deployment and use of these weapons, Britain and her allies will do the same. There is already an agreement concerning chemical and biological weapons.”

“The Geneva Protocol,” said Fedorov. “Yes, that was signed in The Hague in 1925. If they could add atomic weapons to the list, that would be a good step forward. It may give the Americans a bit of a problem if they can’t use the bomb on the Japanese, but at least it might stop a holocaust well before 1945 in this war.”

“That delicate balance of terror,” said Volsky.

“Would such an agreement hold?” asked Karpov. “Remember, this comes at a high cost to us.”

“Oh?” said Volsky. “You had other plans for your warheads, Mister

Karpov?”

“Not exactly, though having a pair of Aces in your hand never hurts when it comes time to place your bets. And I’ll remind you that the only reason we are still here to even have this discussion is because I had a special warhead available for use in that most unusual engagement we just fought.”

“Yes, but if we could get such an agreement, with both sides vowing to refrain from using these warheads, then I think we have done something very significant here. That might even extend to the post-war world. Without the use of Atomic weapons in this war, perhaps we might prevent the arms race that leads inevitably to the next one.”

Hitler’s bomb would not be the last. They knew that the Americans were feverishly working on these weapons as well as the Soviets and Japanese. This would be the last great war fought with tanks and ships and planes. The next one would be fought with the sleek missiles that had come with the Russian ship, *Kirov* , and it would end in the bright fire of utter doom. After that, Einstein had famously said that any subsequent war would have to be fought with sticks and stones....

“I tend to agree,” said Fedorov, “but it will mean we would have to take the ship to the North Sea to get within *Zircon* range of Peenemünde. That’s a long journey, most likely over the north passage, and then we still have to defend ourselves to get in close enough to launch our strike.”

“It would also mean we leave the Pacific to the Japanese and their new F-35’s,” said Karpov, none too happy about that. “However, we have another alternative.”

“And what is that?” asked Volsky.

“*Tunguska* , that airship out there. We were going to take it to Ilanskiy, but I have plenty of airships. We could rig out *Tunguska* to launch a shorter range missile and we could fly to Peenemünde much faster and easier than that trip through the north passage.”

“What about German air patrols?” asked Volsky.

“What about them? *Tunguska* is a high flyer. No German plane could reach us, and if one tried, I’d blow it out of the sky. We already have *Oko* Panel radars installed on *Tunguska* , and *Ilga* hand held SAMs that can range out 6000 meters. We’ll get there, and deliver the weapon on target. I’ll handle it—or at least my brother will. This is the perfect mission for him. That will also allow me to remain here in the Pacific, aboard *Kirov* . Something tells me we haven’t seen the last of this Japanese task force we tangled with. We

could get news at any time that would require us to sortie.”

“You think they will be coming for us up here?” asked Volsky.

“No, I doubt that. But they’ll be gunning for the Americans soon if we allow them to persist here. I’ve spoken to the Captain of the ship we took down. If he survived that, we might just get him on the line again and see if we can come to some agreement.”

“Another protocol?” said Fedorov.

“Why not? They know damn well what they can do to Halsey’s carriers, but I think we should consider trying to dissuade them. We’ve hurt them once, and they know we’re a threat. If we could get them to stay out of this fight, I’m willing to agree to refrain from any further operations against Japan here.”

Fedorov gave him a long look. “Well, that is certainly a change of heart. I thought you were dead set on reclaiming Vladivostok and continuing your war on Japan.”

“How would that help our situation?” said Karpov. “It might help my Free Siberian State, but it would also continue to wreak havoc on the line of causality here. We’ve been trying to find a way to put the genie back in the bottle. Isn’t that what this mission to Ilanskiy was all about? Now Churchill has asked us to hammer the Germans with a nuke, all in the effort to get an agreement by both sides to refrain from any further use of those weapons. Suppose we could negotiate a similar agreement with this Japanese task force?”

“Finally, I begin to hear you talking sense,” said Volsky. “For a while there, I believed you were dead set on trying to take *Kirov* back to 1908, and deal with things there in a more heavy-handed manner. Now you sound reasonable. Yes. If we could get a negotiated agreement, that would be a much better solution. I second this proposal.”

Both Fedorov and Gromyko also agreed that this would be at least worth a try, and in spite of some reservations, they all agreed to make the strike on Peenemünde. Like Tovey had suggested, they would be fighting fire with fire—nuclear fire. Yet they hoped such a demonstration of both capability and determination would sober the Germans, and possibly prevent them from any further use of their own weapons.

“This will be dangerous,” said Volsky. “Once one man starts throwing stones, the other man picks one up and things can deteriorate very quickly. We are counting on Hitler embracing common sense here. What if he should

react differently.”

“Then let us hope our strike prevents him from getting any more of these weapons,” said Fedorov. “

So there they were. Tyrenkov would take another airship to Ilanskiy, and they would go there with him to stand a watch on the upper landing and await his return. Karpov would summon his younger self, and the two of them would discuss the mission planned for the strike against Peenemünde. Meanwhile, half a world away, and many decades in the past, Elena Fairchild, Gordon MacRae, Mack Morgan and company were finally stepping ashore on the Island of Cerigos, knowing the object of their quest was right there, so very close.

Yet what happened next was most unexpected. A Deep Nexus Point had yawned open in this moment, and everything was waiting for its vast jaws to close upon an unsuspecting world that might never be the same again after that had happened. Time itself was waiting, for Fairchild, Karpov, Fedorov, Tyrenkov, and all their secret missions. But another mission was underway, and it was something that not one of them could have ever suspected. Soon Fedorov, Volsky, Karpov and all the rest would come to learn that they were not the only ones with the terrible power to move in time.

The Saga Continues...

Don't miss the season four finale coming September 1, 2017

Kirov Series, Book 32: **Prime Meridian**

The war continues, and the Allies now plan and execute their next move in the West, even as Zhukov resumes his offensive against Armeegruppe South. As the Allied “Second Front” draws closer to Germany in the Mediterranean, Hitler and OKW must find the means to stop two powerful enemies from decisively turning the course of the war against them. Meanwhile, missions in 1943, 1908 and deep within the nexus on the Island of Cerigos threaten to unhinge everything and re-write the entire history to forge a new Prime Meridian.

As Fairchild and company proceed with their plan to secure the treasure hidden with the Selene Horse, their mission meets with a most unexpected twist. Meanwhile, Gennadi Orlov makes a most fateful decision concerning

Ivan Volkov, and when Karpov sends his second self on the mission to deliver a powerful blow against the German *Wunderwaffe* programs at Peenemünde, an unexpected challenger appears.

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie “The Final Countdown” which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to episodes in the never-ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship’s position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon* , then continues the saga in *Altered States* , which begins the second “Season” in the series, extending through Volume 16. The series is presently in Season 4, covering the Allied offensives in North Africa, and the winter battles of late 1942. Boldly enters the crucial year of 1943 in Book 27, aptly titled “1943.”

How to Read the Kirov Series

The best entry point is obviously Book I, *Kirov* , where you will meet all the main characters in the series and learn their inner motivations. The series itself, however, is structured in “seasons” with 8 books in each season. In Season 1, the first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast-paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. Book 4, *Men of War* stands as a sequel to that trilogy and the bridge novel that links it to the second segment of Season 1, beginning with *9 Days Falling* .

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans books 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war in 2021 as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as *Kirov* faces down the US in two eras. Several subplots are also launched that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021, and deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The season ends at another crucial point in history where the ship’s Captain, Vladimir Karpov,

believes he is in a position to decisively change events, the season finale, *Armageddon* .

Season 2 begins with the *Altered States* trilogy, where *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. It is here that a sequential alternate history retelling of WWII begins that will extend to the war's conclusion in 1945. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has powerful new ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov*'s earlier actions.

The *Altered States* saga spans books 9 through 16, initially covering the German attack on the carrier *Glorious* , the British raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power, and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship battles!)

The second half of Season 2 begins with *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive, Operation Sonnenblume. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

Book 14, *Hammer of God* , covers a surprise German airborne attack, and the British campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom* , the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

Book 16 is the Season 2 finale, *Paradox Hour* , where the ship faces the prospect of annihilation on the day it first arrived in the past, 28 July, 1941. This impending event overshadows all else as *Kirov* joins Tovey in a pursuit of *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* as they break out into the Atlantic.

Season 3 then begins with Book 17, *Doppelganger* , where the aftereffects of the Paradox are finally sorted out. Fedorov is strangely displaced, and appears on the newly arrived ship, while Vladimir Karpov survives in Siberia, even as another version of himself defies paradox and appears on *Kirov* . Now Fedorov struggles to prevent the same dominoes from falling and keep the ship from engaging the Royal Navy as it did in Book 1. At the same time, the Siberian Karpov plots to seize control of the ship, and that action invariably involves Ivan Volkov, who has his own plans to strike at Ilanskiy in *Nemesis* .

The war then heats up on the East Front as the Germans launch Operation Typhoon, reaching a dramatic event on the outskirts of Moscow in Book 19, *Winter Storm*. These actions continue through *Tide of Fortune* , as Japan enters the war at Pearl Harbor, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The action then depicts the Japanese Malayan Campaign and the battle for Singapore, naval actions off Java and the invasion of the barrier islands, and then Operation FS, leading to battles in the Coral Sea and of the Fiji Island group.

In *Knights Move*, Montgomery is brought in to try and save Singapore, and coordinate the defense of Java. In the West, as the Germans battle for Gran Canaria in Operation Condor, Admiral Raeder turns his fast raiders loose in Operation Rösselsprung, but the Germans find something far more than they ever expected in the deep South Atlantic.

Turning Point resolves the fast naval actions in the Canaries as the German raiders attempt to return to Casablanca with their mysterious prize of war. Meanwhile, the Japanese invasion of Java is interrupted by an event that threatens to change the balance in the Pacific. A most unusual challenger to the ship they call *Mizuchi* appears on the scene. Meanwhile, in the Western Desert, the British launch Operation Supercharge to try and push Rommel off his Gazala line and liberate Cyrenaica.

In *Steel Reign* , the Japanese offensive reaches its high water mark as Yamamoto launches Operation FS in a bold attempt to storm the Islands of Fiji and Samoa and isolate Australia. He is opposed by a determined stand made by Admirals Fletcher and Halsey in the desperate battles of the Coral Sea and Koro Sea to decide the fate of Empires. Meanwhile Vladimir Karpov continues his long planned invasion of Sakhalin Island, but Japan now has a powerful new champion as the Destroyer *Takami* is detached north to join

Admiral Kurita's task force. The showdown is resolved in the season finale, *Second Front* , as the Allies storm ashore at Casablanca and Lisbon in September of 1942.

The series continues in the premiere of **Season Four: *Tigers East***, where Rommel regains his lost glory in the deserts of Libya while Patton drives east in an attempt to enfilade Von Arnim's defense in Algeria. Manstein takes his hammer east as well to Volgograd, where the grueling fight for the city begins in *Thor's Anvil*. As the new year of 1943 dawns, the Allies now begin their war in earnest, and the outcome of the battles looming ahead will decide the course of the war.

Book 27, *1943* starts the critical middle year of the war as the action moves to the Pacific. The U.S. goes on the offensive, mounting a major push on Fiji, and amphibious landing by Halsey at Efate and MacArthur at Noumea. Carriers clash and the Japanese rush new hybrid ships into battle as the first of the new Essex Class carriers arrive to redress the balance on the US side. Then Japan's secret weapon, the destroyer *Takami*, receives an unexpected order to return to Yokohama, but the journey there will open a door to new opportunities.

In Book 28, *Lions at Dawn* , the war moves back to North Africa, where Eisenhower, Montgomery, Patton and the Air Marshalls plan their drive on Tunis. General Patton has ideas of his own, and they do not involve waiting for Monty to fight his way along the Algerian coast. His plan presents a major crisis for Kesselring and Von Arnim when Hitler orders the withdrawal of all Germany's elite paratroop units. The Führer has eyes on a new prize in the Middle East, and devises a daring return to that theater in Operation Phoenix. Meanwhile, General O'Connor's British 8th Army begins its big push to capture Tripoli, but he meets a determined and skillful defense by the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel.

An exploration of St. Michael's Cave at Gibraltar by Fairchild & Company leads to a hidden mystery beneath the Rock, and far to the east, the isolated atoll at Eniwetok receives some very unexpected visitors. The surprising developments set the destroyer *Takami* on a dangerous collision course with Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Gromyko, when the Russians set out to cleanse the timeline of all contamination, including their own! Events lead to a dramatic battle at sea that neither side ever expected.

Book 29, *Stormtide Rising* , covers the Allied forces campaign in Tunisia. The Germans conceive a bold new plan that sends Rommel west to the

heartland of Tunisia where he confronts the American Army under General Patton. The Axis forces launch Operation *Sturmflut* (Stormtide) as the famous names etched in the original history at Kasserine, Faïd, Gafsa and El Guettar will again see the rising tide of war.

At the same time, Hitler presses his daring invasion of Iraq and Syria in Operation *Phoenix*, while launching the cream of his airborne troops against the British outpost on Crete with a much belated Operation *Merkur*. As Guderian pushes into the heartland of Persia, Hitler sets his eyes on the richest prize in the world—all the oil the Reich will ever need to fuel the fires of war. Yet before Guderian can drive south, he must first secure his lines of communication. That necessity leads to a dramatic battle for the ancient capital city of Baghdad, with both sides risking all they have to rule the hour.

Meanwhile, Fedorov and Karpov face the grim reality of their situation and come to a decisive conclusion about how they must proceed.

In Book 30, *Ironfall*, the war continues in 1943, as Japan launches a bold new attack against the Fiji Islands that leads to a decisive battle off Yasawa. In Syria, Erwin Rommel unleashes a classic flanking attack towards Damascus with “Operation Eisenfall,” as the Allies attack Kesselring in Tunisia with Eisenhower’s “Operation Hammer.”

Then, as the German 11th and 17th Armies slowly grind down the last of Soviet resistance in the Caucasus, tensions reach a breaking point when they meet Volkov’s forces dug in west of Maykop. The Führer has ordered his legions to take and occupy that place, and Ivan Volkov chooses to stand his ground. The war in the east now threatens to spiral out of control, with new fighting erupting on every frontier when General Zhukov opens his Spring offensive in a massive attack towards Kharkov that now threatens to reshape the entire front.

Meanwhile, Elena Fairchild finally learns the fate of the men she sent into the hidden passage beneath St. Michael’s Cave, and also makes a surprising discovery that will give her the means to find and retrieve the key that was lost on the Battleship *Rodney*. As she plans her mission, Fedorov and Karpov arrange a meeting with Volsky and Gromyko to discuss their new plan to shatter this altered meridian by traveling to 1908.

In book 31, *Nexus Deep*, the Fairchild Group launches its mission to seek the key lost aboard *Rodney*, even as the Allies close the door on the war in North Africa with Operation Chariot. As the 5th Panzer Army dies in Tunisia, Hitler must now find a way to shore up *Armeegruppe South* while

also finding divisions to guard the West.

Both sides now plan operations for the late Spring and early Summer. The Allies must decide whether to strike at Sardinia or Sicily in an attempt to topple the regime of Mussolini and knock Italy out of the war, while the Germans must choose from several operations in the south, Habicht, Panther and Zitadelle. The Soviets plan new offensives of their own that will prove, once and for all, that the tide of the war in the east is shifting.

Meanwhile, the work of Lord Elgin is strangely mirrored by the action of his son, the 8th Earl, and a seemingly small squabble on the China coast at Canton escalates into an event that has sinister implications for the quest Elena Fairchild has undertaken. Then, just as Fedorov and company begin to finalize their plans for the mission to 1908, Admiral Tovey makes a dramatic request.

Detailed information on the battles covered in each book, including battle maps, is available at www.writingshop.ws.

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*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 4: *Tigers East* (1942 – 1943)

25) *Tigers East*

26) *Thor's Anvil*

27) *1943*

28) *Lions at Dawn*

29) *Stormtide Rising*

30) *Ironfall*

31) *Nexus Deep*

32) *Prime Meridian*

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[1] *Much of this dialogue is paraphrased from Lord Nelson's own letters.*

[2] The letter presented in this narrative was very much in accord with one that Manstein had written in the real history, recounted in his own record of these events in the volume "Lost Victories," page 453, quoted here in part, with adaptations to account for the alternate history being presented in this volume.

[3] In the real history, The Hermann Goring Division crossed the Straits of Messina on June 20, 1943. The Allies did not launch *Husky* until July 10.