

Kirov Saga



Book 26 in the Kirov Series

Thor's Anvil

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Thor's Anvil

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

As you may have noticed, I'm a serious and lifelong student of WWII. I can remember reading *Sink the Bismarck* in Middle School, and have loved all the battles on sea and land ever since. A warmonger? No. A man in love with this history? Yes. So please pardon me if I build a level of detail into these stories to properly honor that history, and the men and women who lived it through. Sometimes the outcome of a battle or entire campaign can hinge on one division, one regiment, one battalion, even one man. I try to go to each of those levels in my recounting of the war, Strategic, Operational and Tactical. And I try to give you a chair in the briefing rooms, and sometimes even get you inside the heads of all the main historical figures.

In the author interview for this book, I talk more about all this, and why my understanding of the history reaches deeper than the sweeping overall strategy of things. But I haven't lost sight of where the series all began, on that ship in the Norwegian Sea. I know some of you are out there just wanting to walk that deck. Don't worry, there will be lots more action featuring the original cast and crew to come. Yet the series isn't just named after that ship, but also the man that gave the ship his name. One of the principal historical figures is young Mironov—Sergei Kirov, and his struggle to save his nation is at the heart of this story. The lines of fate run through him in very many ways, and his tale will continue in this volume, along with Fedorov's mission.

That man now guides the history that gave rise to the ship that launched this series. In that light, please understand that the retelling of that history is now my overweening vision for the series as a whole. The life and survival of *Kirov*, the ship, and all the crew, depend on the outcome of this war. The entire question concerning the Grand Finality raised by Elena Fairchild and Paul Dorland rests on the plates I'm stacking up in this kitchen. Will the altered history ever give rise to the building of that ship? The crew of *Kirov* shattered the original history, and now I am doing my best to piece it back together, and their fate rides in the balance.

Some, like Karpov, have jumped into that history wholeheartedly,

intending to win; to make it their own. Others, like Fedorov and Volsky, remained deeply conflicted about what they were doing. Over time, they come to see that they can never hope to restore things as they were. That admission means their lives are now on the altar I am building to that history, come what may. They must decide what they will do now to see it all through to a conclusion. I will do the same.

A lot of you write to me with comments, questions, suggestions or just to say what you like most about the series, or what you want to see next. Some tell me they wait for the next historical segment, the retelling of the war that is now part of the great labor of the series. Some say they want that material less detailed, while others ask for more. Some say they love the character based segments, both with the main characters aboard *Kirov*, and with the historical characters. Some want the naval action, others the land battles. In this offering, I will try to please you all.

I have a lot of ground to cover here. We last left the Pacific Theater on the 5th of May with that big carrier duel that became “the Battle of the Koro Sea.” That ran in tandem with the confrontation between *Takami* and *Kirov* in the Sea of Okhotsk. Now we return to the Pacific to catch up on what has been happening after *Takami* broke off and Kurita wisely retired from that engagement.

After that, I have six or seven chapters for you on the conduct and outcome of Fedorov’s mission, and its consequences. There will be a brief recap of what has been going on with Rommel and Patton, and that takes us to the halfway mark. The last half of the book will then be devoted to the east front, the struggle at Volgograd, and the Russian Winter Counteroffensive continues with yet another bold thrust by Zhukov in “Operation Jupiter.” I hope you enjoy it as much as I did while writing it, the research, the men, the battles.

Fear not! We return to *Kirov* big time in 1943. One Vladimir Karpov is about to take off the gloves....

- John Schettler

Part I

Cherry Blossoms

“That is the beauty of the rose, that it blossoms and dies.”

— **Willa Cather**

Chapter 1

On the northern Island of Hokkaido, the Cherry Blossoms were blooming very late that year. It was already June, the war over six months old, but the beauty of the fragile white flowers had not been frightened away. Yet that year, another flower was blooming in a secret design facility near Yokosuka that had first been set up to evaluate models of foreign aircraft acquired by Japan before the war. It was now working closely with the Naval Academy and design bureau at Tsukijii near Tokyo Bay, and the flowers they were contemplating would one day come to be known as the MXY-7 Ohka, or “Cherry Blossom.”

For a long year now, there had been rumors, followed by intelligence, concerning the existence of a phantom ship that had appeared in the Atlantic, soon found to be closely cooperating with the British Royal Navy. It was thought to be a highly advanced prototype ship, bearing weapons that soon shocked military analysts in battles with the German Kriegsmarine. They were naval rockets, fast, precise in their targeting, and very deadly.

The rumors remained simply that for some months, talk in the bars, whispered tales, sailor’s stories as wile and contrived as those of a fisherman describing his catch. But they did not remain rumors and stories for very long. Not ten days after the dramatic opening attack on the American fleet at Pearl harbor, the rumors and gossip became a grim reality, witnessed by officers of the highest rank aboard the flagship of the *Kido Butai*, the carrier *Akagi*.

A sighting report had come in from a search plane describing a fast moving vapor trail approaching Nagumo’s task force from the north. That alone had been puzzling, for there was no land mass of any kind in that direction where a plane might have originated.

“What is this supposed to mean?” said Nagumo at that time, handing the report to the ship’s Captain. “A fast moving vapor trail?”

The Captain frowned at the paper, but at that moment a bell rang and the upper watch was reporting verbally that something was in the sky to the north. Nagumo considered the possibilities quickly. The only land mass that could have launched an aircraft was Wake Island to the south. What would be

coming out of the north? Could one of the American carriers have been so bold as to follow them? Surely his search planes would have spotted such a task force creeping up, but he had not paid much attention to the northern flank. He had three fighters up on cap, with three more on the decks of his carriers ready for immediate launch. He had it in mind to have his Air Commander, Masudo Shogo, vector in one of those fighters for a look, until he saw what the watchmen were reporting with his own eyes.

The meaning of 'fast moving vapor trail' was now immediately apparent. Something was soaring towards his position, high in the sky, but now it began to descend, like some demigod or demon swooping down. It had to be a plane on fire, he thought, raising his field glasses, and thinking he could even see the faint gleam of fire there. Some ill-fated pilot was falling to his doom, but impossibly fast in the descent. Who could it be?

Then, to his utter amazement, the falling aircraft leveled off just before it would have crashed into the sea. All the men on the bridge who saw it reacted, some pointing in awe. The Admiral's eyes narrowed as he watched. It was coming, still burning from what he could see, low and fast over the water, and the fire from its tail glowed upon the sea. That such a descent could have been corrected at the last moment like that seemed an impossible feat of flying to his mind, but now he would see more than he ever thought possible. The aircraft suddenly veered left, then right again, dancing over the water like a mad kami from hell. The pilot must have finally lost control, he thought, but the longer he looked, the more those first moments of surprise extended into shock.

The maneuvers that aircraft was making could not be accomplished by any plane he had ever known, and yet there was something about the snap of its course corrections that led his mind to conclude they were carefully controlled.

The thing in the sky came flashing in at the ship, as if deliberately piloted and steered to collide with the carrier. Nagumo saw the deck of *Akagi* heave upward when it struck, exploding deep within the innards of the carrier. He staggered under the jarring impact, still stunned and not yet even knowing what could have possibly hit the ship. Yet he had seen it with his own eyes, and now the roar of chaos and fire was all about him. It was as if some demonic spirit had simply reached down and hammered his fist against the side of the carrier, breaking its hard metal hull and shattering all within.

The shock of that hit weighed heavily on the entire bridge crew, and they would soon learn that the entire center of the upper hanger deck was involved with fire.

“It was clearly a single plane,” said Fuchida. “I was well aft when it came, seeing to the three Zeros we have spotted on ready alert. The impact knocked me from my feet.”

“One plane?” said Shogo. “Its speed was fantastic! Could it have been the rocket weapons we were warned about?”

“The tales told by the Prophet?” said Hasegawa. “You might just as easily tell me it was a sky demon”

“That is not far from the truth,” said Genda. “Plane, rocket, it does not matter. We have seen what it can do, how it can move and strike us with such precision.”

“It must have been piloted,” said Shogo. “No rocket fired from over the horizon could hit with such accuracy. So if it was piloted, then it must have been launched from a carrier. We must find it and destroy it at once!”

Those first words, uttered in both awe and fearful respect for the weapon that had just attacked them, would soon reach the ears of the aeronautical designers at technical facilities all over Japan, and one in particular, an Ensign Mitsuo Ohta, took them to heart.... “No rocket fired from over the horizon could hit with such accuracy. *It must have been piloted....*”

The concept of rockets was not a new thing, particularly to the people and culture of Japan. The Chinese Song Dynasty had created rudimentary rockets as early as the year 1232, and enemy warriors actually described them as “Fire Arrows,” with a devastating explosion on impact that could be heard five leagues away. In the 14th Century, the first multi-stage rocket would be born, described as a fire dragon in the artillery manual known as the *Huolongjing*, or *Huo Lung Ching*.

Used by the Chinese Navy, it would be fired from a ship, and could then even ignite smaller rocket propelled arrows from the front of the missile, the fiery breath of the monster used to attack the enemy. Others called them flying crows with magic fire. So it came as no great surprise that the Germans of the 1940s were not the only nation working on rocketry, and the Japanese interest in the subject had been dramatically accelerated when the *Akagi* was struck by what might easily be described as a flying dragon on the 16th of December, 1941.

Now Japan had finally seen the devastation that could be achieved by the use of naval rocketry. Work on their own rocket engines had been feverishly advanced since that time, and a great deal of progress had been made, particularly when a cache of secret documents were mysteriously delivered from the Japanese embassy in Orenburg, a “gift” from Ivan Volkov. In them were detailed plans of models the Germans were currently working on, and suggestions for solving problems in the design of their own rockets, improving range, airframe design, aeronautic stability.

The one problem that would evade a solution was how such weapons could be guided to their intended targets. No mechanical solution could be found. The Germans were exploring avenues of research using radio controlled systems that might be guided to targets visually by a pilot in the plane that carried and launched their aerial flying dragons. So the Japanese also began to develop versions of a missile that would look very much like the German V-1 Buzz Bomb.

The Ohka was their version, and they were working on a host of variants, some that might be mounted on a Model 24J Bomber, the one the Allies called “Betty.” This was the Model 11, and it was powered by three Type 4 Mark 1 Model 20 solid fuel rockets. It would have limited range, making it necessary to use the bomber to carry the weapon within 20 nautical miles of the target, and the bomber could not fly off the deck of a carrier. While these liabilities made the Model 11 unsuitable for use by the Navy, the Japanese Air Force was keenly interested in it as a possible means of precision bombing, because the guidance problem had been solved another way—the Ohka would be designed to be guided by a pilot. That solution would later lead the Americans to dub the missile the “Buka,” which was the Japanese word for “stupid,” or “fool.”

Yet the men who would line up in Japan to volunteer to pilot those revolutionary craft were no stupid fools, but the brave souls who would come to be known in Japan as the *Jinrai Butai*, the Thunder Gods. A plan was already in the works to produce 750 of the Model 11 Ohka missiles, and there would be 750 men ready to pilot them, each one willing to give his life to deliver the weapon he controlled to its target. There, painted on the side of the fuselage of the Ohka, was the image of a cherry blossom, and when the Thunder Gods flew, their souls would fall like those fragile flowers when they died, but they would take many souls with them, or so it was believed.

For the Navy, the Model 22 Ohka seemed much more interesting. It would use a new engine, and have a much longer range. In fact, the Germans were planning to launch their own V-1s from France, flying them over the English Channel to hit targets all over England, and they could achieve a range of 250 Kilometers, delivering an 850kg warhead of Amatol. The Navy wanted a similar engine on the Okha, and Yamamoto knew exactly where he could find the blueprints—in the library of a most unusual ship that had come to him after that fateful and untimely eruption of Krakatoa off Java. While that explosive event had savaged Japanese troops ashore and at sea, it also delivered a new champion to the fleet, the strange men and their marvelous ship of war, the *Takami*.

They had told the Admiral they could defend the fleet with their own amazing radars and aerial rocket weapons, and even pose a challenge to the mysterious raider that had attacked *Akagi* and sunk the *Hiryu*. A plan had been hatched to launch an ambush when the Siberians boldly moved to invade northern Sakhalin Island, then called North Karafuto by the Japanese. One of Yamamoto's most trusted Admirals, Kurita, led two of Japan's fast new battleships north to escort *Takami*, and the carriers *Tosa* and *Kaga* joined to provide the air power.

Unfortunately, the plan failed, and now Takeo Kurita's neck burned with shame as he came to report to Yamamoto, and explain why. He bowed low, a long and deep bow that would only be offered under such grave circumstances, and Yamamoto, knowing what was in the mind of his able officer, sat patiently until Kurita finally rose, eyes still averted, the shame a look of actual pain on his face. Then Yamamoto decided enough was enough.

"Very well," he said. "I have seen, and quite clearly, that the mission recently concluded has not caused any more hair to grow on the top of that bald head of yours, Kurita. Make your report, but do not think, for a single moment, that I will entertain any thought of your resignation, and far less of any notion you may have of ending your life. You were sent to conduct an offensive operation, just as Nagumo was sent to Pearl Harbor, nothing more, nothing less. It so happens that both my warriors returned with casualties. So be it. Now tell me what happened."

Kurita cleared his throat, taking some time to find his voice. "Sir," he said. "The mission was not well coordinated, and I take full responsibility. I was prevailed upon to hold my battleships back, though I had every wish to

close and engage this *Mizuchi* when it finally appeared. Yet this Captain Harada aboard *Takami* pleaded with me to refrain, and I was foolish enough to heed him. I should have advanced to engage when I saw how futile the strange rocket weapons he used were.”

“Futile? You saw them?”

“Of course. My battleships were out in front, some 20 miles ahead of the *Takami*. We first saw the enemy missiles firing, and my men beat to quarters to engage them.”

“Did you not heed the warning I gave you concerning these rockets?”

“I did sir, but I believed the armor on my ships was strong enough to prevail, and my gunners brave and skilled enough to defend my battleships. To do otherwise would be cowardice.”

“Yes, yes I have heard that from many others, and I do not wish to hear it again now. A man has a brave heart when he goes into any battle, but he must also have a head on his shoulders, and know when and how to fight. Did these missiles attack your ships?”

“One struck *Haruna*, but for the most part, these rockets simply passed us by, six or seven in a long train, all heading south. I should have increased speed immediately to engage the enemy, but this Captain Harada...”

“You should have done no such thing. I sent you to the wreck of the *Mutsu* for a good reason, and now we have damage on *Haruna* to repair. I will tell you that I second the movement suggested to you by Captain Harada, and it is very fortunate that you carried it out. Had you persisted in any attempt to engage this *Mizuchi*, you would have surely been visited by more of those naval rockets.”

“But sir, how can we defeat the enemy if we do not attack him?”

“That remains to be seen,” said Yamamoto. “Certainly Captain Harada hoped to use guile, and his own naval rockets to prevail. What happened to the air strike?”

“It was ill-coordinated. The carrier planes were late, the land based planes ineffective, and I must—”

“No Kurita, do not attempt to take that upon yourself either. It was the responsibility of the carrier commander to get his planes where they belonged, not yours. Frankly, when I discuss this further in a moment with your subordinate, Captain Harada, I expect I will learn that this battle could have ended in no other way. Everything depended on the rockets his ship

carried. If they failed to find and hurt this *Mizuchi*, then there was nothing more your battleships were going to accomplish. At least both ships remain seaworthy, as well as both of our carriers. *Haruna* has damage, but it will be repaired soon enough. I want you to see to it personally, but that ship will be detached from your division. You will take the newer ship, *Hiraga*, in its place. Then prepare your battleship squadron for further operations as soon as possible.”

“But sir, I...”

“But sir what? Do not think any shame you may feel in this failure exempts you from further duty here. Nagumo felt the same when he returned from Pearl Harbor with only three operational carriers. We fight, we take losses. Sometimes we prevail, and at other times our enemies will get the best of the situation. That is the end of it. That is war. It is clear to me now that I failed to place the adequate tools in your hands to complete this mission successfully. Two carriers were not sufficient. It would have taken at least four in my estimation, and your battleships should not have been where they were. As you can see, the range of these naval rockets makes such a strategy foolish. Only our carriers have the means to strike the enemy at long range. From now on, your battleships will serve as fast escorts, running with the carriers, and doing everything possible to protect them. So this will be my order to you. Get *Haruna* operational again, and then prepare to join Carrier Division 3 with *Hiraga* and *Satsuma*. You will receive further orders in the near future. Understood?”

Kurita bowed again, then nodded.

“Good,” said Yamamoto. “Now then, I will see this Captain Harada and his executive officer next, and hear their report. But understand this—you did everything I asked of you, and so I order you to set down the burden that you now carry, just as I asked the same of Nagumo. This war is only beginning. I need every officer, and every ship we have. We had 15 carriers operational on December 7th, 1941. Now we have only eight operational, and six have been sunk. *Zuiho* Survived the 5th of May, but just barely. Even when that ship returns, our carrier fleet is nearly cut in half, though we are now commissioning the *Taiho* to try and redress those severe losses. That said, *Taiho* will likely be the only new aircraft carrier to join the fleet for many more months until *Shinano* is completed. So every one of our remaining carriers is now worth its displacement in gold. See that Carrier Division 2 is

well guarded.”

That was that. Yamamoto had no room for shame ridden officers. The war was now going to enter a much more dangerous phase. The Americans had been hurt, and very badly, but it had taken those seven carriers lost in action to put that damage on them. Yamamoto knew that there were now at least seven or more enemy carriers building in the United States, while in Japan, only the *Shinano* would be ready for operations soon. That was a matter he would have to redress, and quickly.

He himself had already gone to the Emperor, his own head lowered with shame, to make his report. He knew this war would be costly, never expecting Japan to emerge from it unscathed, but these early losses were particularly severe. He had been forced to ask the Emperor to activate the emergency fleet expansion project that had been secretly planned before the war.

As for this *Mizuchi*, that ship was a monster of a different kind. Yes, it would have taken at least four good carriers to have any chance against that beast, he thought. But how many of them would survive? I had hopes that this *Takami* might weigh heavily in the balance, but apparently those hopes were ill-founded. Now I must find out why.

“Very well, send in this Captain Harada and his Executive Officer. That will be all.”

Chapter 2

“**Then** you have no more missiles to attack this Siberian ship?” Yamamoto had heard Harada’s report of the battle, the how and why of it all; the decisions made, missiles fired, and the outcome. Now his mind had moved on to the possibilities that lay ahead.

“No sir,” said Harada. “To have any chance at all against a ship like that, it was necessary to fire everything we had in one salvo. Admittedly, the odds were long, but we at least had some chance of scoring a hit. As I have told you, our ship was primarily designed as an air defense fleet asset. We are meant to operate in a task force of similar ships, guarding other important fleet assets.”

“Your modern day carriers?”

“Such as we have. The Japan of 2021 does not have very many aircraft carriers. A few helicopter carriers are now receiving a new plane, but otherwise, our navy was prohibited from building carriers, because they were deemed to be an offensive weapon, and the force was merely designed for defense after Japan’s defeat in this war.”

“I see...” said Yamamoto. There was that word again, defeat, and it was a hard one to bear. The images he had seen in the library of the *Takami* still haunted him, the burned out cities, the image of *Musashi* dying that gallant but horrible death. For all the power he felt beneath him as they sat there in his stateroom aboard *Yamato*, he knew his own flagship was also fated for destruction. It all seemed inevitable now, just as he feared at the opening of this war. It all seemed to be written, as it was in that library, and how could he ever hope to write that history otherwise? He realized, even now, that Japan had gone to war with the United States without any clear plan on how that enemy would be defeated.

“So now you are a fleet defense asset,” he said to Harada. “You have no further offensive capability?”

“We have a few torpedoes, though they are also defensive weapons, largely for use against enemy submarines. The explosive charge is under 100 pounds, only ten percent as compared to your own Type 93 torpedo. We might use some of our anti-aircraft missiles in an anti-shipping role, but only

against very lightly armored targets. They would not put much hurt on a cruiser or even an American carrier of this era.”

“But this *Mizuchi*... It still has such weapons that can hit our ships?”

“If I may, sir,” said Fukada, “we aren’t exactly certain how many missiles they have, but twenty is a normal loadout on their main ship killers. They fired thirteen at us, and we stopped them all, except the one that struck *Haruna*.”

“Thirteen?” said Yamamoto. “Interesting. They have already fired three at my carriers, so that make sixteen. And they fired three at *Mutsu* and *Chikuma*, so that makes 19. Are you suggesting they may only have one more of these naval rockets at their disposal?”

“We don’t know that for certain,” said Harada. “Yes, twenty is a normal loadout, but they may have been carrying more—at least they seemed to suggest they had a loaded gun still pointed at my head when we spoke with them.”

“Spoke with them?” This surprised Yamamoto.

“Yes,” said Harada, “we had a nice little parley with the enemy in the middle of the fight. They threatened us with further harm unless we withdrew. I called their bluff, but nothing else came of it. In the end, withdrawal was the wiser course, and I strongly recommended that to Kurita, though I know he wasn’t happy about it.”

“Very well,” said Yamamoto. “Even if this ship does have only one more of these rockets, it only took one to sink the *Hiryu* and one to send *Akagi* into the docks for four months. Let us assume they have at least that many, and possibly more.”

“I believe they do have more sir,” said Harada. “Missiles are bundled in groups, and then mounted in silos or compartments beneath the deck. They fired twelve of one type missile at us, a very deadly model that we call the Sunburn. It took a good many of our own missiles to stop them, but we got them all. Then, near the end of the engagement, they fired a different kind of missile at us, much faster, though with a smaller warhead. We used a special defense system I have not spoken of to target and kill this missile, but the point I am making is that it would be rare, indeed very odd, if such a missile were mounted alone. In fact, they are designed to work in groups and be fired in salvos. They hunt like a pack of wolves, and are even able communicate with each other and make independent decisions about targeting assignments.

No, it would have to be in a module or group like the other missiles we faced. For this reason, I suggest they have more of that type. A small group might see four in one underdeck compartment, so I would say they have at least three more.”

“Unless those were the other three missiles they fired at the carriers,” said Fukada.

“They may have been the nest mates of the last missile they fired at us, yet we can’t be sure in any case,” said Harada.

“Then let us simply assume our enemy can still harm us,” said Yamamoto. “That is enough to guide our thinking here. However, the fact that his ordnance is limited is most interesting. I suppose I always knew this to be the case, but now it is more important, because we can threaten his ship and force him to use what he may have left, even if it costs us lives and ships to do so.”

“And it will,” said Harada. “Count on that, so choose the ships you want to expend carefully, and the men. I made such a threat, but the enemy failed to fire anything more at us. If they had, we might not be discussing this here.”

“Then you would agree that your ship has little offensive capability now.”

“True, but that does not mean we cannot be very useful. Our defensive capability is still available, and our electronic systems and radars can provide a great deal of situational awareness in a battle scenario. We can scout and find the enemy, and defend against air attack with an almost certain kill on any plane we target.”

“Until your own anti-aircraft missiles run out. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“And how many of these remain on your ship?”

“38 of one type, and 12 of another longer range variant.”

“So you can kill 50 planes. I suppose that is useful to know, for it represents a good part of an American carrier wing.” Yamamoto was filing all of this away into a compartment of his mind. There was no recrimination in his interaction with these men, and he did nothing whatsoever to shame them. They had done what they could, and failed to kill *Mizuchi*. Now he wanted only to ascertain how he might still integrate *Takami* into his fleet.

“Well gentlemen,” he said. “I must say that Admiral Kurita was none too happy when he left just now.”

“We could see that,” said Harada.

“He is a proud man, and perhaps I was remiss in putting him in a situation where he held the burden of command, while your knowledge of your own capabilities required you to intervene. I will not do this again. Henceforth, you will operate with our carriers. I will now take the advice offered to me by your Executive Officer earlier. Your ship will assist operations currently underway here in the south.”

“We would be honored, sir.”

“And you may be very busy. While you were away much has happened. Operation FS was launched, and initially with some success. We sank two enemy carriers in the Coral Sea and a third in the Koro Sea off Fiji. Yet for this we paid a very high price. Our own carrier fleet has nearly been cut in half. We lost *Hiryu* last December to this *Mizuchi*, then *Gozo* and *Mezu* were sunk in the Gilberts, *Shokaku* in the Coral Sea, and the hardest blow of all fell on that Koro Sea battle. There we lost *Zuikaku* and *Shoho*.”

“Those are very heavy losses,” said Fukada.

“Heavy indeed. At the moment we have 8 carriers operational. *Kaga* and *Akagi* are repaired and constitute Carrier Division 1. *Soryu* and *Tosa* form Carrier Division 2. The new carrier *Taiho* was commissioned in June, well ahead of schedule, and is presently in sea trials. Beyond that, we have three smaller carriers, the *Hiyo*, *Junyo* and *Taiyo*. I would like to assign your ship to Carrier Division 3. It will operate under Hara with the new *Taiho*, and two of the light carriers. I have a new mission in mind, but first you must understand the present situation.”

“Operation FS?” asked Fukada.

“It was partially successful. We have troops on Fiji, but so does the enemy. Their Marine Division has landed there, and it has been a bit of a slugfest. At first it appeared as if they might push us right into the sea, but we were able to reinforce our garrison. Yet keeping them supplied is now a daily burden. By day, planes we send to Nandi duel with their own planes at Suva Bay. By night, we send in fresh troops and supplies on fast cruisers and destroyers from Noumea. Their own carrier force remains in the area, though it now operates from Samoa as a forward base.”

“Which carriers survived?”

“*Enterprise* and *Wasp*. They also have the two hybrids that could return to the theater at any time, and a small escort carrier, more a seaplane tender, the *Langley*.”

“Excuse me sir, two hybrids?”

“Yes, they fought the French fleet before your arrival, sinking the *Bearn*, and even jousted briefly with one of our own light carriers. One was damaged in that action and sent to Pearl Harbor, but I must assume it has been repaired.”

“French fleet?” said Fukada. “I don’t understand.”

“It was just a few destroyers, light cruisers, and the one carrier, which the Americans quickly sunk.”

“Do you know the name of these ships—the hybrids you mention.”

“*Antietam*, and *Shiloh*. I believe those are battles from their Civil War.”

“Yes,” said Harada, “but we’ve not heard of those ships, at least not this early in the war.”

“*Antietam* was a long hull *Essex* class ship,” said Fukada. “Yet it did not appear until very late in the war, and there was no carrier by the name of *Shiloh* in WWII. Nor was there ever an engagement with the French fleet.”

“Nor a ship by the name of *Takami*, or another we call *Mizuchi*,” said Yamamoto. “Perhaps you gentlemen need to spend some time in *our* ship’s library.”

“It appears so,” said Harada, looking at Fukada.

Yamamoto continued. “There are three operations before the navy now. The first is the continuation of Operation FS. The second the persistence of this enemy raider in the north, *Mizuchi*, and the action on Karafuto. I fear neither one will have an easy or a speedy solution. My choices are limited. I can split the fleet 60/40 and try to bring one or another theater to a decisive resolution in our favor. May I ask you whether you think a massed fleet effort would prevail over this *Mizuchi*?”

“A massed effort,” said Harada. “You mean with many more carriers? That would be hard to say.”

“What if I were to assign four carriers to attack this ship?”

“Then they should all be grouped together, and *Takami* would have to be slightly forward of that group as an air defense picket. Any attempt to confront this raider on your own would likely only result in more losses to your carrier fleet. Of this I am almost certain. But with us present, our missile shield could defend you, and perhaps your strike wings could get something through, but you should expect heavy losses.”

“From the anti-aircraft missiles on this ship?”

“Yes sir. It is a much larger ship than *Takami*, and carries many more missiles.”

“How many more?”

“Fukada?”

“Over a hundred medium range, and perhaps another 30 to 40 longer range missiles after those they expended against our attack. Beyond that, they have very potent close in defense systems. Even planes that manage to get through the missile shield will face conventional gunfire that is lethal, and even more short range missiles. This *Mizuchi*, as you call it, is one of the best defended ships in the world—even in our world of 2021, and certainly in this one.”

“And if I chose to use two carrier divisions here in the south? What then?”

“Operate together in one group. Only then can we provide you with the defense you need. Our missiles, while they last, can strongly augment your own fighter defenses, though we would have to discuss how to coordinate that. Your fighters would have to be held back until our missile defense was expended, so as to minimize the risk of hitting our own aircraft by mistake.”

“Of course,” said Yamamoto. “And which of these operations do you deem the most important, the most decisive?”

Harada raised his eyebrows. “Getting *Kirov*—*Mizuchi*—would certainly be decisive if it could be accomplished. Without that ship there can be no further operations supported against Sakhalin. It would basically shut down that northern front, because your naval air power could then stop any replenishment effort for troops the Siberians have already landed. Then again, breaking the last of the American carrier capability in the south, and becoming masters of the waters around Fiji, could be equally decisive. Your control of that island goes a long way towards isolating Australia, and if you do sink those remaining enemy carriers, it will be a good long while before the Americans can do anything more offensively in the Pacific.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Yamamoto. “Karafuto is a nuisance at the moment. The enemy has a foothold in the north, but we have sent the remainder of the 7th Division from Hokkaido, and the 54th and 53th Divisions are still available on northern Honshu. Those forces can easily create a stalemate there, but driving off or destroying the American carriers produces a rather dramatic shift in the balance of power now being

contested.”

“Sir,” said Fukada. “You said there were three operations earlier. May I ask what the third is?”

“The British,” said Yamamoto. “The Indian Ocean. We had planned a raid there, to strike the British fleet at Colombo. The eruption of the volcano that preceded your arrival here put an end to those plans, but that ceded control of the entire Indian Ocean to the British. They are fighting us in Burma, and the Army wants support. In effect, they want us to become masters of the Indian Ocean as well.”

“How big is the British naval presence there?”

“They have two aircraft carriers, possibly three by now, and a number of surface ships. I was considering sending Carrier Division 3 there, well supported with surface ships, to see about this problem.”

“Then you want *Takami* in the Indian Ocean?” said Harada. “And where might you elect to campaign?”

“Against the American concentration around Fiji. I deem it the most strategic sector of the front. However, what you have just said concerning our chances of dealing with this *Mizuchi* is most sobering. It is obvious that a single carrier division cannot do the job. It is also apparent to me that as long as this ship remains at large, we can pose no real threat to the enemy lines of communications back to their northern port at Magadan. But soon it will be winter again, and that front will freeze over and become dormant. The ice will prevent Siberian ships from landing at Okha in the north, and they will have only their airship fleet to deliver supplies. Given that we have already stopped their attempt to push into southern Karafuto, I believe that front will soon become stagnant, allowing me to safely proceed with operations in the South Pacific.”

“A wise course,” said Harada. “Now sir, how can we assist you?”

Chapter 3

“**Colombo,**” said Yamamoto. “I want that base neutralized. To do so would not only serve to support our troops in Burma, but also cut British communications with India, and further isolate Australia by preventing any supply convoys from reaching it via the Indian Ocean.”

“That is a taller order than it may seem,” said Harada. “This attack you speak of was made in the history we know, but it was only a raid if I am not mistaken.” He looked at Fukada now.

“Yes sir, the Indian Ocean Raid. It should have already happened by now, a raid led by Admiral Nagumo, and with six carriers, three fleet carriers, and three lighter carriers. The battle was not a strategic victory for Japan, as no effort was ever made to occupy Ceylon. Doing that would have removed two vital British bases from the theater, Colombo and Trincomalee, and also put the Indian port of Madras under Japanese airpower from those same bases. It never happened, and the carrier duels and surface actions were inconsequential. The British fell back on Madagascar temporarily, which they had already taken from the French, and then built up again on Ceylon, remaining masters of the Indian Ocean for the remainder of the war. If you are going to do this, sir, may I respectfully suggest a full hearted commitment of the resources necessary to win?”

Yamamoto nodded. “Given the heavy losses to our carriers, that may not be easy—a tall order as you say. It was my plan to use Carrier Division 3, and then combine Carrier Divisions 1 and 2 for operations around Fiji. As for any invasion and subsequent occupation of Ceylon, that will depend greatly on the Army’s cooperation. Troop commitments are already strained, but something might be found. At the moment, your orders will be to sail for Singapore and rendezvous with Carrier Division 3. That group will be composed of the new fleet carrier *Taiho*, and light carriers *Hiyo* and *Junyo*. Between the three, there will be a little over 150 planes at Admiral Hara’s disposal, and he will be your commanding officer. *Taiho* is a new direction in carrier design. It has armored flight decks, and side armor as well. Our carriers are fast and efficient, but fragile. *Taiho* will correct that deficiency.”

“It was sunk by a single torpedo fired by an American submarine,” said

Fukada, which gave Yamamoto pause.

“It is frustrating to hear such a thing,” he said. “The futility of everything I do now is made apparent to me each time you open your mouth!”

“Forgive me, sir. I say this only by way of warning, and in the hope that it will be something we can prevent. *Taiho* had a design flaw that failed to properly vent fumes from aviation gas. Her bomb and torpedo magazines were well protected, but there were empty spaces around the aviation gas bunkers, and fumes built up in those spaces. They should be filled with sand or concrete immediately. That would help eliminate the problem and also provide a splinter shield for those bunkers. Beyond that, damage control failures were the real reason for the carrier’s demise. A few of our engineers might be posted to that ship and help with that training. And with *Takami* present, our sonar will assure that submarine attack never takes place. Forewarned is forearmed, sir. That is all I was trying to convey.”

“Very well,” said Yamamoto, “as your foresight is so keen, then let me ask you another question. It concerns access to materials in your library.”

Harada did not know why, but that put him just a little on edge.

“What would you need, sir?”

“There is a program underway in certain research centers involving the use of these rocket motors. When you made that little demonstration off Davao, I was quite surprised, initially thinking it to be the fruits of this research. Surprise was not half a word for what I felt when you revealed the truth of your identity to me. You have showed me the end of the road we now walk with this war, and all in an effort to persuade me not to undertake this journey. As we have seen, events had a gravity of their own, and here we are. I do not think it will ever be possible to undo the steps we have already taken on this path. Once the order was given to Climb Mount Niitaka, our course was set. Yet the end I saw in the photographs from your library is too dark to contemplate. No sane man would ever wish to lead his nation to such a disaster. So now I ask you to help me reach a different end, and one that preserves the integrity of our nation, and spares our people the horrors I saw in your books and photographs.”

“We are willing to help in any way we can,” said Harada. It was a case of in for a penny, in for a pound, as the British might say.

“These rocket weapons you possess,” said Yamamoto, “are they clearly the future in terms of the projection of military power at sea?”

“A place remains for the aircraft carrier. That was proved here, and the United States continues to rely on carrier based air power even in our time. They use those planes to protect their ships, just as you do now, but if ant get through, then medium to close range air defense is largely a case of missiles against planes, or other missiles, and certain powers now also see the missile as the only foil to carrier based naval supremacy.”

“Then you may already know that both Germany and Japan are working on these weapons now.”

“Yes sir, and we know the outcome of that research as well.”

Yamamoto nodded, a wry smile on his face. “How strange to think I hesitate briefly here to reveal what is now a military secret, for you are men who have seen the end of all these events. So you must certainly know that we have a weapon in development, a rocket powered craft we call the Okha.”

“Yes sir,” said Fukada. “However, it did not reach deployment until it was too late to make much difference in the outcome of the war. By then, the American carriers had decided the issue, and it was only a matter of time.”

“Time and that other terror weapon I saw images of over Hiroshima,” said Yamamoto. “Knowing that, I wish to find a way for *our* carriers to decide the issue here before that weapon makes the outcome of this war inevitable.”

“The American project that delivered that weapon is only now beginning in earnest,” said Fukada. “If the history we know is any guide, it will take them three years.”

Yamamoto considered that. “But if we achieve a decisive outcome here before that, perhaps the negotiated settlement you suggested to me might be possible.”

“That gets more and more unlikely with each battle fought,” said Harada.

“Then you believe there is no hope? How can I proceed here knowing that the sum of everything I do leads to defeat and the destruction of our nation?”

“Sir,” said the Captain, “Mister Fukada has just explained how the fate of the *Taiho* could be brightened considerably. In the same way, the future you saw in our library might still be avoided. Negotiations may still be possible, but to force the Americans to the table, we would have to demonstrate that a military victory would be impossible for the them to achieve.”

“Winning the battles we have just discussed would be a necessary first step,” said Fukada. “Yes, dominate the Indian Ocean, defeat the Americans on Fiji, occupy Samoa, destroy the last of the American fleet carriers. These

things are still within your grasp now. You can still prevail, and we can help you. We could not defeat our enemy, but our ship can still tip the balance decisively in one more key engagement. Given that, it may be wise to consider another attack on *Mizuchi*.”

“But you have just told me you have no further offensive capability.”

“But you do, sir. Your carriers do, and if enough of them were grouped in one massive attack, you might get hits, and it will only take one or two to cause significant damage. Modern ships are not well armored. Their defense relies on missiles.”

“I see,” said Yamamoto. “Yet that would put every carrier I might assign to such a mission at risk. Surely that is the case in every operation of war, but *Mizuchi* seems to hit anything it fires at. Nagumo’s description of the death of *Hiryu* was none too pleasant.”

“They failed to hit *Takami*,” said Fukada. “And they tried thirteen times. In the same way, the missiles we still have could protect your carriers, and then it would be simply a matter of swarming the defender with as many planes as possible.”

“You are forgetting the speed demons,” said Harada, prompting Yamamoto to give him a quizzical look. “I’m sorry sir, but the last missile *Mizuchi* fired at us, the one I mentioned earlier, was very fast—twice the speed of the first twelve we defeated. The missiles we fired at it failed to acquire the target, and it was only our last ditch inner defense that scored the lucky hit. Yet if it had failed to do so, *Takami* would most likely have been sunk. If the enemy has more of these fast missiles, then our ability to defend your carriers may not be absolute.”

“True,” said Fukada, “but if we do not attack, and *Takami* expends its remaining missiles in other operations, then your chances of killing *Mizuchi* diminish considerably.”

“So you are saying we may have only one last chance,” said Yamamoto. “I understand. And if the enemy has more missiles than you believe, and they are these speed demons, as Captain Harada describes them, then what?”

Before Fukada could argue that away, Harada spoke up first. “If they were to fire a salvo of four or five such missiles, assuming they still had them, then we might get one of them, two at the most. The others would reach a target. And one thing more. This ship also carries torpedoes—533mm with a 300kg warhead capable of ranging out 50 kilometers. It also has

another model that is one part rocket, and one part torpedo. It fires into the water, ignites its rocket engine while submerged, then emerges from the sea to approach the target. It can then deploy as a torpedo, or a depth charge in the sea, and that rocket extends the range to 120 kilometers.”

“Quite sobering,” said Yamamoto. “That is three times the maximum range of our Type 93 torpedoes. Hopefully it would miss at such a range. Our own units do not fire the Type 93 at its maximum range for that same reason.”

“Unfortunately, this torpedo will be much more accurate than your Type 93. It uses what we call inertial guidance, not the best way to find a target, but much better than anything used in this war. The fact that it closes most of the range as a rocket in the sky, is also a factor. Hopefully we might be able to shoot one down, unless it deploys into the sea again as a torpedo.”

Yamamoto nodded. “I will consider what you have said here. Risking the carriers also gambles with the edge we presently have relative to the Americans. They are the real enemy. I do not think *Mizuchi* could ever win the war against us, or that the Siberians could ever successfully invade Japan. As for the Americans...”

“Agreed, sir.” Harada decided not to speak of the possibility that *Kirov* harbored nuclear weapons. Instead he focused on the battle against the United States. “The next six to eight months will be decisive. *Mizuchi* certainly remains a threat, but for now, at this moment, the carriers still rule the Pacific. So fight your war as you would if our ship were never here, Admiral. Fight your war with those carriers, and win.”

Yamamoto nodded. “I thank you for your cooperation, and your enthusiasm, in spite of the recent setbacks. In considering that, I wish to ask one more thing. We know the Americans are building a new class of aircraft carrier. What can you tell me about this?”

“The *Essex* Class,” said Fukada. “Those ships will form the heart of the US naval force in this war. They are over 60 feet longer and wider abeam than the *Yorktown* Class, and much heavier at nearly 37,000 tons, full load. Later models will get even heavier, but they are still every bit as fast as *Yorktown* was at 32 knots. They will also have much better anti-aircraft defense, and over 60mm of armor on the main flight deck. These were fairly durable ships, with 100mm side armor as well. They also have an interesting innovation in the deployment of a deck-edge elevator in addition to two

inboard elevators. But their real virtue is the air wing, at least 90 planes, and the *Yorktown* carried up to 110.”

“*Yorktown*? We sunk that ship.”

“They will rename many of their new *Essex* Class carriers after the ships they lost early in the war—*Yorktown*, *Lexington*, and *Hornet* will all sail again as new *Essex* Class carriers, and I suppose the *Wasp*, if you manage to sink that one.”

“All of them? How many of these carriers will they build?” asked Yamamoto.

“The first arrives this year, the *Essex*. In 1943, six more join the fleet, and in 1944 they will commission another seven, with at least three more ready in 1945.... Before the war ends, if it does end the way it did before.”

“Then they are presently building more carriers than we started the war with,” said Yamamoto.

“And that is just the *Essex* Class,” said Fukada.

“They will also deploy a light carrier, the *Independence* Class, ships that were converted from their *Cleveland* Class Cruisers. They will carry only 33 aircraft, but they will commission at least nine of those ships in 1943.”

“Bringing nearly 300 more enemy planes to sea,” said Yamamoto, somewhat discouraged. “This was my greatest fear, that tremendous industrial might of the United States. They will build new carriers faster than we can sink them!”

“Unfortunately, sir, I must regretfully report that not one of the *Essex* Class Carriers were sunk in the war. Many were hit and damaged, but none sunk.”

“Yet that history may not repeat,” said Harada. “You have already inflicted more losses on the American Carrier fleet than occurred in the history we know. At the moment, the Americans remain very vulnerable.”

“But six months from now they should have at least three new *Essex* Class carriers,” Fukada warned, “and five of the smaller *Independence* Class.” He wanted no misunderstanding as to what may be coming.

“So in that time they will replace all their losses,” said Yamamoto, “and they will match our fleet carrier for carrier, including the ships we presently have nearing completion. This is exactly what I feared, and why I had to go to the Emperor to request we activate the emergency fleet expansion program. We call it the shadow fleet, and phase one of this program was

already activated in 1940, for many of our own carriers were converted from battlecruisers, seaplane tenders and even fast tankers or ocean liners. All three ships in the *Tosa* Class were once battlecruisers, and now I must share yet another state secret with you. The *Tosa* Class battlecruisers were not the only hulls completed for new ships of that nature. Four hulls were laid down in our *Amagi* Class, and two hulls in the *Kii* Class. Only two of those six ships were ever commissioned as actual battlecruisers, our *Amagi* and *Kagami*, but the other hulls have been fitted out with propulsion systems, and all the interior spaces are completed—except they were not designed as battlecruisers, but carriers.”

“You mean you have other carriers in the pipeline?”

“Correct. We can build a carrier on one of those four hulls twice as fast as we might build a battlecruiser or battleship. Even the third of the *Yamato* Class hulls was converted to build a carrier under this program, the largest in the world when it is completed—*Shinano*. We also have several smaller carriers in the shadow fleet program, conversions from fast liners and such.”

“Will any be ready soon?”

“Not soon enough, as far as my needs are concerned. Here we are discussing how to manage a war on three fronts, and there will never be enough carriers to go around. We are fortunate that the design of *Taiho* was accelerated before the war, and I suppose we still have the battleship proponents to thank for the innovations in that ship. We will take your advice concerning those empty spaces around the aviation fuel bunkers, and better damage control. As for the bigger hulls now under conversion, the two ships in the *Amagi* Class will be the first to appear, perhaps within six to eight months if the resources can be found. We have named them *Mikasa* and *Shirane*. Much effort is being made to complete *Shinano* as well.”

“Interesting.... That ship was not ordered converted to a carrier until the Midway disaster,” said Fukada. “Nor was *Taiho* built this early. In fact, it was the need for more toughness and durability at sea that led to the ideas put into that carrier. Very strange.”

“I won a few arguments in 1940,” said Yamamoto. “That is why we even have these abandoned hulls intact for these projects. As for toughness, the side armor was already there for *Mikasa* and *Shirane* when they were laid down as battlecruisers. The armored deck idea was taken from the British when we obtained the plans for their *Illustrious* Class carriers. Frankly, if I

had my way I would gladly trade this massive battleship we stand on now, and its sister ship *Musashi*, for two more fleet carriers. The loss of both *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* has set us back a great deal. It seems I have avoided this Midway disaster you speak of, but the 5th of May in the Koro Sea was a hard day for us. Believe me, our shipyards have been very busy ever since that day.”

“Let us hope you can produce these ships in time,” said Harada.

“Alright, gentlemen, I see now what we are up against, and what you say is true, the next six to eight months will be the crucial time. If we do not prevail now, then it may not matter whether *Shinano* and other conversion programs like *Shirane* ever set sail. We still have five fleet carriers, and they have only two. Now is the time to win this war, and you can do your part in the Indian Ocean.”

“Sir, when would you want this operation to begin?”

“Not for some time. The fleet is reorganizing along the lines we have discussed. Take your ship to Davao. A tanker will be waiting off shore for you to refuel. From there you will proceed to Singapore. The ash from that volcano is still a persistent haze in that region. It has been erupting off and on for months, so have a care. The Sunda Strait is still a very dangerous place. Once you arrive, refuel again and wait for Admiral Hara’s task force. He will transmit your orders at that time.”

The meeting ended on a high note, for all present could still take some solace from their superiority in carrier numbers. But their calculus was already off, for even as they spoke, the USS *Essex* was slipping out to sea on her maiden voyage. It was not supposed to be commissioned until December of 1942, reaching the Pacific in July after an extensive series of sea trials. But many things in the history were askew, and the *Essex* program was also accelerated. The need being so great, the ship was already enroute to the Pacific, and so the four carriers Yamamoto hoped to challenge the Americans with off Fiji, might soon be facing three on the American side. Yet no one knew that when the meeting ended.

They would know it soon enough.

Part II

Operation C

“Clever archers who, designing to hit the mark which yet appears too far distant, and knowing the limits to which the strength of their bow attains, take aim much higher than the mark ... to be able with the aid of so high an aim to hit the mark they wish to reach.”

— Niccolo Machiavelli

Chapter 4

The plans that then developed from the meeting between Yamamoto and the officers off the *Takami* were clearly aimed at finding the strategy that would win the war, achieving some decisive advantage in the time frame Harada had put forward. They had six to eight months to prevent any US counteroffensive from gaining traction in 1943. With winter coming, Yamamoto ordered all his fleet carriers to leave the Home Islands and muster at Truk. He wanted them as far from the unseen raider in the Siberian north as possible. The Siberians would be opposed by the Army and air force instead, and no longer challenged at sea. All remaining carrier power would be concentrated in the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean operation.

Now Yamamoto took stock of the forces he might have available. The 2nd Infantry Division, savaged by the eruption at Krakatoa, was slowly being rebuilt from new conscripts in Japan for anticipated operations in the south. One regiment was being built in Nasu, another at Sato, and the third at Fukushima. With the 48th Division already committed to Fiji, if the Ceylon operation should ever materialize, it would be given to the 5th Division, which was still a strong two regiment nucleus that could receive replacements and become a full triangular division, though it would never again be the powerful force it was as a square division under Yamashita. The Battle at Tengah Airfield on Singapore had killed many of its toughest veteran troops.

If necessary, General Nishimura stated that he would consider releasing one regiment of the Imperial Guards for deployment on Ceylon after it was taken, but only if the Army could not make a similar force available at Rangoon from the troops already committed to the Burma campaign.

All in all, Japan now bet its fortunes on the outcome of these crucial operations in the south. The additional land territory they might take was minimal, but the strategic windfall in being able to control the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean, and in isolating Australia from the US, would be significant if they could be achieved. Everything would be risked on achieving that outcome, but the one factor the planners were leaving out of their thinking, the sea monster they had come to call *Mizuchi*, would still remain a

dangerous wildcard.

Yet Yamamoto was a realist, and the images he had seen in the library aboard *Takami* still haunted him. He was well aware that other staff officers at Imperial General Headquarters thought that even the push into the Solomons was an overextension of Japan's military capabilities. Now, to add the Indian Ocean as an objective seemed an even greater reach. So we will simply aim higher, he thought.

To win in the south he had to first secure Fiji, and that could only be done if he achieved decisive naval superiority there. If he could not do that, then the Americans would have a strong base to organize further offensives into the Solomons, or against the French New Hebrides. He knew that New Caledonia, and particularly the major port there at Noumea, was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it thrust like a dagger between Fiji and Australia, but if Fiji were to fall, it would then be subject to attack from both those enemy camps.

Australia was also of great concern, for in it the Allies possessed what appeared to be an unassailable anvil upon which to forge their weapons of war. The vast Pacific Ocean offered endless sea lanes. Though it would take much longer, American convoys could venture deep into the South Pacific if they had to, and approach New Zealand from the southeast. In time, they would still get enough troops, supplies and equipment to Australia and New Zealand to pose an offensive threat.

In the north, though New Guinea had been mostly cleared of enemy presence, there was still a nest at Milne Bay that had to be taken, and the Port of Darwin on the North coast might be used as a base for a thrust into the Arafura or Banda Seas. That would be possible only if the enemy achieved naval superiority, but he had to always keep it in the back of his mind. Perhaps he should take Admiral Hara's advice, and permit him to make a landing at Darwin, anchoring the defense there instead of at Dili on the Island of Timor.

Then there were the British, who had a division at Perth to use if they should want to strike at the barrier islands again. That was why he decided to send Harada and his ship into the Indian Ocean. If Hara's carriers could defeat the British squadron, and occupy Ceylon, any threat from the British would be completely neutralized. And then, there was always the possibility that the Americans might use their base at Hawaii to strike directly into the

Marshall's, or attempt to retake Wake Island. From those bases they could attack the Marianas, and such a strategy would completely bypass the Solomons, New Hebrides and New Guinea. That was what they actually did in those books the Admiral reviewed. And then there was the problem on Karafuto Island, where the Siberians had been stopped by the Japanese 7th Division, but still represented a serious danger.

So many threats, from so many directions, and the defense rested primarily with the navy. At first glance, it seemed that all the dramatic gains achieved in 1942 were war winners, but Yamamoto knew that even his face cards could be taken by the enemy trump cards. Yet 'life was not a matter of holding good cards,' said Robert Louis Stevenson, 'but of playing a poor hand well.' Yamamoto was considering how to play out the hand he now held to win this game, and it was time to lead. He wanted no shadow over his shoulder when he finally turned to face the Americans again.

* * *

In the high summer of 1942, Great Britain, which had stood alone in the west since the fall of France, at last had a powerful Ally in the United States. In spite of that, the British Empire still remained under grave threat, and Churchill could see shadows everywhere he looked. The German Occupation of Norway, with their new major base at Nordstern, was a constant threat to the northern seas, and served to sever the line of communications to Soviet Russia at Murmansk. The U-Boat threat was at its height, making cross Atlantic communications with the US precarious. Britain's Pacific holdings, chiefly Hong Kong and Singapore, had been smashed and occupied by Japan, and now the Japanese were in Burma.

In this light, the British occupation of Madagascar, taken from the French in May of 1942 in this history, and its strong presence on Ceylon at Colombo were now the two bastions of power aimed at securing lines of communications through the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. Those lines reached out to Australia and New Zealand, and had once linked India with the Empire's Pacific holdings before the war. Now they served commercial shipping to ports like Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, where the Jewel of Britain's occidental empire, India, was slowly coming under increasing threat from the Japanese.

The brief but violent British assault on French held Madagascar had taken place right on schedule, between the 5th and 7th of May. As such, it was eclipsed by the far larger battle off Fiji then underway, and the decisive collision in the Koro Sea. Yet for the British, seizing Madagascar was of great significance. It was one of two vital possessions Vichy France held that the Allies dearly coveted, the other being the New Hebrides.

“We already know what the French have suggested,” said Churchill to Brooke when the matter had come up. “They’ll go so far as to hand the entire island right over to the Japanese. Then what? From there they will have cut us off from Ceylon and India, and if they take that naval base, they can put bombers on Durban, and stop every last convoy we send around the Cape. It would be a disaster of the first order, so that place simply must be taken. I don’t care how we do it, or where the troops come from. You must find them, and carry it off like a thief in the night before the Japanese realize what they’ve lost.”

Brooke handed the matter to Tovey for the naval arm, and he teed up *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* with 82 planes to cover the operation. He then scraped up the 29th Independent Brigade, the 13th and 17th Brigades of 5th Division, the 7th South African and Rhodesian 27th Brigades. Number 5 Commando would be on the cutting edge of the attack. This was a force of some 15,000 troops against the French garrison of 8,000 troops and six tanks, with 32 antiquated planes.

The landings had occurred at the northernmost tip of the island where the vital protective Diego Suarez Bay provided one of the best anchorages in the Indian Ocean. The 29th Brigade was the hammer that struck that anvil, with the other British forces following later. The action in the north was a great success, and though low level fighting continued for the next 45 days, Churchill had Madagascar, and saw it as a great outer bulwark protecting the vital Cape Town region.

When ULTRA intercepts indicated that the enemy was now planning a sortie into the Indian Ocean, it was therefore cause for some alarm in Whitehall. It was clear what their objective might be—Ceylon. If Japan were to take that, they could use it to base aircraft, naval units and submarines that could pose a threat as far away as the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Beyond that, Ceylon was also a source of over 90% of Britain’s rubber, and it would produce 60% of the rubber all the Allied powers used, a resource that was

much needed in wartime. All those tires on trucks and planes needed it, and it had many other wartime applications. Ceylon was also a major producer of tea, and that, too was a vital resource insofar as the British were concerned.

Yet for all that virtue, Ceylon's liability was that it could not produce enough food to feed its local population. As Hara's carriers headed west, there was no more than 14 days supply of rice on the Island, and the island needed to import over half a million tons of rice per year. Some of it came from India, more from the Middle East, and that meant the waters around the island were full of merchant shipping on those thin, highly vulnerable sea lanes. The Japanese knew this, and therefore one of Vice Admiral Ozawa's chief objectives, in addition to screening Hara's carriers, was to seek out and destroy merchant shipping off the coast of India.

And so just one brief look at a single piece of the great puzzle that had been the British Empire, was quite revealing. This piece was particularly important, for it connected directly to great segments of the puzzle on either side, the Australian and New Zealand Commonwealth to the east, and India to the north. Remove it from British control, and a deadly gap appeared in the puzzle that could only be filled again by fire, steel, and blood. In many ways, it was more strategic than Malta was in the Med, or even Gibraltar, and perhaps even the equal of the Suez Canal in terms of importance to that theater. Churchill himself commented that the approach of Japanese naval units to Ceylon filled him with dread.

"The most dangerous moment of the War, and the one which caused me the greatest alarm, was when the Japanese Fleet was heading for Ceylon and the naval base there. The capture of Ceylon, the consequent control of the Indian Ocean, and the possibility at the same time of a German conquest of Egypt would have closed the ring and the future would have been black."

British power to protect and secure the vital resources and lines of communication flowing through Ceylon now rested on Somerville's Indian Ocean Squadron, three carriers, three old battleships, three heavy cruisers and a few other light cruisers and destroyers. After watching the Japanese destroy Pearl Harbor, seize the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, New Guinea, push boldly into the Solomons and all the way to Fiji, Churchill had every reason to be fearful with the coming of this news.

In early July, he had very little to defend that island. He had pleaded with Prime Minister Curtin to allow him to keep two regiments of the Australian

6th Division there, but the loss of Port Moresby and the brief Japanese air raid on Port Darwin had ended any hope of achieving that. So it was then down to the British 34th Indian Division, reinforced earlier that year with the arrival of the 16th British Regiment, and the HQ and 21st Regiment of the 11th East African Division. A few security battalions had been raised among the locals, but that was it, with service troops in the two major ports, some AA guns and radar crews.

A squadron of Blenheim bombers arrived at Colombo from Greece, and was operating at the improved airfield at Ratmalana with a squadron of Fulmars. Two squadrons of Hurricanes came all the way from North Africa to China Bay at Trincomalee, where the racecourse had been converted to a makeshift airfield. At Trincomalee, or 'Trinco' as the British called it, the posh country club, became a headquarters; the tennis courts were used to grow vegetables, and the Cricket Fields and club became the domain of the R.A.F pilots. On the southern tip of the island, a small lake at Koggala was a perfect basing spot for Catalina search planes. Up on Adams Peak east of Colombo, one of the highest in the central island mountains, the British had deployed an air search radar set to sweep the seas in all directions around the island.

There, an imprint in a boulder was said to be the left footprint of the Buddha itself. The Hindus claimed it was the footprint of Lord Shiva, the Muslims that of Adam. Others said it was the tread of the god Saman, the deity of the rising sun, and so all these legends made the place a sacred site that drew many pilgrims in better times. Now it was the searching eye and ears of the Royal Navy, for this time, a different rising sun was coming to Ceylon with Admiral Hara's 3rd Carrier Division.

As on Singapore, rumors of impending doom began to spread. The locals had all heard what happened in Hong Kong, of the Chinese massacred at Singapore and other tales of Japanese atrocities. Many were already heading for the highland, thinking it would be a sanctuary in the event the Japanese invaded. The exodus from the coastal areas was so pronounced, that the ship repair company at Colombo, which normally employed 3600 locals, suddenly found that only 76 showed up for work. Fear was a toxin that could spread faster than Malaria, but it may have been well justified.

The Japanese were coming, and with some of the very best troops in the army, the survivors of numerous campaigns in China, Malaya and the costly

battle for Singapore. The 11th Regiment of the 5th Division was already boarding the transports at Singapore, and the clock was ticking.

Somerville was not enthusiastic about his chances. He knew that the Japanese were masters of naval air operations involving carriers, and that their planes were in many ways superior to those on his own ships. He had a small outpost at Port Blair on Andaman Island that he hoped to use as a trip wire to alert him to the Japanese attack when it came. When communications were suddenly lost with that outpost, he knew the storm was coming, and gave the order for his squadron to assemble in two flotillas, one fast and one slow.

The fleet footed carriers would be his sword, and the lumbering battleships his shield. He gave some thought to simply sending those battleships west out of harm's way, to Addu, but discarded it thinking he would need every ship he could get his hands on. If *Prince of Wales* had met her fate off Malaya as it did in Fedorov's history, he might have thought twice about sending his fleet out to face the Japanese naval aviators.

But that had never happened....

Chapter 5

That meeting with Yamamoto at Truk had occurred on the 30th of June, and *Takami* lingered there for several more weeks. *Taiho* was commissioned, but still cutting her teeth in the waters off the Philippines, working in the new equipment, pilots and planes. During this period, *Takami* sortied once with Carrier Division 1 to help cover a supply run to Fiji. Fukada had hoped they might encounter the Americans, but that operation was unopposed. On the 15th of August, Admiral Hara informed Yamamoto that he was now prepared to head south to rendezvous with the remainder of his new 3rd Carrier Division and other fleet units.

Takami departed for Singapore, arriving there on September 15th after a stop at Davao. They tried to be discreet. Anchoring several kilometers off the island, but the local commander, the irascible General Nishimura, took a personal interest. He had a launch approach the ship, and a message was delivered, inviting the ship's Captain and Executive Officer to dinner ashore in Singapore. To decline such an invitation would be a serious affront, and knowing that Yamamoto was relying on Nishimura to provide troops for the Ceylon Operation, Harada agreed.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said Nishimura. "Please excuse the gloomy weather. Yet the cooler summer caused by all that ash and soot in the sky has at least given us some relief from the heat."

"Thank you, General, you are most gracious."

"I had hoped to see Admiral Hara at this dinner, but it seems he is still rounding up carriers and battleships. I understand that he will have our newest carrier, *Taiho*."

"Yes sir. At least we were told that by Admiral Yamamoto."

"You spoke with him personally?"

"He was kind enough to brief us and relay our orders."

"I see... Tell me, Captain, is it true that the Siberians have invaded Karafuto?"

"Yes sir, they have."

"Most astounding. I'm sure that will be on Yamashita's plate soon. Let us hope he does a better job than he did during this campaign."

“Taking all of Malaya in five weeks wasn’t good enough?” Harada smiled. There was something about this man that he did not like, but he kept those feelings as opaque as possible.

“Singapore is part of Malaya, is it not?” said Nishimura. “In fact, it was the only part that really mattered. I took that for the Empire after Yamashita failed. It was no surprise to me when he was relieved here, and I was given command in his place. Now the city is well in hand. I have rooted out most of the undesirables, particularly the Chinese, and things are running smoothly again.”

“Things seemed to be in order,” said Harada, his smile a bit thinner.

“I have also heard you have a most unusual ship.”

“Oh? Not really. It is a prototype heavy destroyer, with our very best new radar sets.”

“And more,” said Nishimura. “Don’t think I have not heard all the talk about rocketry.”

“Yes, those are prototype weapons as well, but if you will excuse me, we are not permitted to discuss them. I’m sure you will understand.”

“Of course.” It was enough for Nishimura that the existence of such weapons was confirmed. Now he wanted to see what this operation would require of him. “Good that you were in the right place at the right time to rescue general Imamura. He still speaks highly of you. Now I understand you will be heading into the Indian Ocean—a very good idea. There isn’t much threat the British can pose now, not with the Air Force posting strike planes here on my airfields. Yet the British cannot be left to ripen out west. Soon the stench will begin to blow this way. It is about time Yamamoto decided to go and prune the tree.”

“Yes sir,” said Harada.

“Then you will attack their bases on Ceylon?”

“Sir, Admiral Hara will have been fully briefed on this operation, and he will have orders for us when he arrives here. I am only a Captain.” Harada thought he had better say as little as possible.

“Well, I am a General,” said Nishimura. “You see, the Navy needs me to provide troops for this operation, and so I already know a good deal.”

“Probably more than we know, sir. Care to enlighten us?”

Nishimura smiled. “Attacking Ceylon is certainly the mission. What else? So I will provide two regiments of my 5th Infantry Division, and hold a

regiment of my Imperial Guards in reserve. They were the heroes of Singapore, under my personal command, I might add.”

“Most extraordinary, sir. A lot has been said about them.”

“Oh? What is going around?”

“Why, in the operations up north, the troops of the 7th Division were told to remember what happened here, and how your troops crushed the last of the enemy resistance.” Harada was, of course, buttering the General’s bread, even if none was being served that evening.

“Indeed? Well that is very true.” This one is sly, thought Nishimura. He is clearly trying to say as little as possible about this ship, the *Takami*, or so I am told. No one seems to have heard anything about such a ship before it appeared. Most interesting. It seems Yamamoto keeps a few flowers hidden in his garden these days. After the loss of so many carriers, he has every need to be cautious.

“So the newest carrier, and your ship, will join our two newest battleships. I was told to expect *Satsuma* and *Hiraga* here in three days. Yamamoto must be very serious about this campaign. There is only one thing I cannot seem to understand. Your ship was up north with those battleships, neh? And I believe there were two fleet carriers out to sea with you as well. How is it nothing came of that?”

Harada had no idea where this man was getting his information, or what he might have heard. “I don’t understand,” he said. “We were to cover the transfer of reserve units to Karafuto, and that mission was completed.”

“Yes, but not without incident. Didn’t *Haruna* take damage in that operation?”

“If I may, sir, how is it that an Army General knows so many things about naval operations?”

Nishimura inclined his head. That skirted the border of impertinence. “It may interest you to know that I am being considered for a higher position on the Imperial General Headquarters. I must therefore keep abreast of more things than the number of Chinese heads I take here each day.” He smiled, but behind it was the tension of a look that said ‘don’t question me like that again.’

“Of course,” said Harada.

“May I ask if you have heard anything concerning this rogue Siberian vessel in the north. The name *Mizuchi* is being spoken even here, and in

fearful whispers.”

“Respectfully, sir, I was told to discourage such rumors by the Admiral.”

“Of course,” said Nishimura, a little mocking echo of what Harada had said a moment earlier. “However, rumors do not compel the fleet admiral to pull all his most important ships out of the home waters, do they? I think there is more to these stories than the wild imaginations of sailors in the bars of Yokohama. Very well, I see that dinner is being served. Let us enjoy the meal, and talk again after. Would you be interested in a tour of the island? I can certainly arrange that.”

“You are most kind,” said Harada, “but I have pressing business aboard ship.” And no, there won’t be a tour arranged for you there, he thought. That’s what this one was angling for. He’s heard something, and more than he should. Either that, or interests on the Imperial General Staff have contacted him and asked him to go fishing here with this little dinner party. I must be very cautious.

Throughout this exchange, Fukada remained discretely silent, but he could easily perceive the polite thrust and parry in the conversation, and he knew enough to stay out of it. If asked a direct question, he would speak, but otherwise, his was to be a quiet presence, but one without opinions. Deference to the Captain was expected, and he knew how to play the part.

At that moment, and half way through the dinner, there came a quiet but persistent knock on the door. Nishimura turned his head with a look of displeasure. “What is it?”

A man entered, walking quickly up to the General and handing him a slip of paper, which Nishimura read silently. “Well,” he said. “It seems we have an uninvited guest tonight. An enemy submarine has attacked a supply ship in the Strait of Malacca. *Kasigi Maru* has been hit!”

Harada stood up immediately. Bowing as he did so. “General, I thank you for your hospitality, but it is clear that I have urgent business to attend to. Mister Fukada, we must depart for *Takami* immediately.”

Urgent business indeed, thought Nishimura. See what you find out there, Captain, because this message was, of course, pre-arranged. I’ve had my time with you, and I see that you are just another tight lipped Navy man, most likely thick with Yamamoto if he entrusts you with this mission. You will find nothing, for there is no submarine, nor any ship by the name of *Kasigi Maru*. Let us see how *you* like chasing after ships no one has heard of.

He smiled, then turned to an aid waiting quietly by the door. “Bring my pen and paper. I must draft a special message to go out in a secure pouch on the next plane north.”

That message would be sent to the Imperial General Staff, and was also a pre-arranged code, just a single kanji character that read “Sakura,” the word for Cherry Blossoms. Only one man would understand what it meant—that the ship Nishimura had been told to look for and report on was there at Singapore.

Nishimura was not the only one interested in the doings of that ship. The Imperial General Headquarters was also curious, particularly one Hajime Sugiyama, Chief of Staff. It was a ship, he was told, that had already demonstrated the ability to fire and use rocket weapons similar to the secret ‘Project Okha’, or Cherry Blossom. There was a great deal of rivalry between the Army and Navy, and Sujiyama wanted to know everything he could about the rumors now circulating—of a ship called *Mizuchi*, of battles fought in the Sea of Okhotsk, and of a ship named *Takami* that appeared nowhere on the official register of commissioned vessels in the Navy.

Yes, he was most curious.

* * *

When they returned to *Takami*, Harada and Fukada went straight to the bridge, immediately checking sonar and radar stations for any reports. There was nothing out of the ordinary.

“We have what looks like a small commercial freighter in the Strait of Malacca,” said Ryoko Otani, the Lieutenant on the SPY-1 System. “I’ve tracked them heading southeast around Pulau Sugi, and into the South China Sea.”

“Probably supplies for the forces still at Palembang on Sumatra,” said Fukada. “Those airfields have been abandoned due to the heavy ashfall, but the garrison left there still has to eat.”

“Ensign Shiota,” said Harada. “Have you been monitoring local signals traffic here?”

“Yes sir, but there’s been nothing unusual.”

“No S.O.S. or distress calls of any kind on the military channels? Nothing from a ship designated *Kasigi Maru*?”

“No sir, nothing.”

“Look that ship up in the WWII ship registry.”

A moment later Shiota reported that there was no ship by that name. “I’ve got a *Kasi Maru*, *Hasuga Maru*, *Kage Maru*, *Kasato Maru*, but no *Kasigi*. That oiler that serviced us was the *Kuroshio Maru*. Could that be it, sir?”

Harada gave Fukada a look. “What do you make of this?”

“The General seems to have been pulling our leg.”

“Yes, but I wonder why? Was he just irritated that I wouldn’t say anything about the ship or the operation?”

“Anybody’s guess, sir. He was a sly bastard, that much was certain.”

“Right,” said Harada. “Finished his little interview and then got rid of us.... But if that is so, the messenger thing had to be all pre-arranged.”

“It seems that way, sir.”

Harada filed that away mentally, with a note to be extra cautious with Nishimura in the future. He thought about reporting the incident to Yamamoto, but it sounded too trivial to bother the Fleet Admiral with something like that. Yet it was clear to him that the General had gone on a little fishing expedition, and that was grounds for some discomfort.

Three days later they picked up two contacts at 18 knots rounding the cape and entering the Singapore Strait, and they were not commercial ships. Two grey sisters emerged from the low rolling fog in the strait, and the bridge crew finally got a close look at the new battleship class they had fought with up north, but never really got close enough to see.

“Beautiful beasts,” said Harada, his eyes lost in his field glasses. “They look a lot like the old American *Iowa* class in profile, clipper bow, built for speed, and triple turrets.”

“Ships that never were,” said Fukada. “You won’t find them in the WWII ship registry database either. That has to be *Satsuma* and *Hiraga*.”

“Then Admiral Hara can’t be far behind with the carriers.”

He arrived two days later, on the 18th of September, in a well escorted group that now hove to in the strait off Bantam Island, about 30 kilometers south of the main city of Singapore. Hara wanted no prying eyes noting his ship types, and planned to transit the Singapore Strait the following day, after the oiler *Kuroshio Maru* serviced ships needing to refuel. There was Japan’s newest carrier, the *Taiho*, looking very much like the one that had entered service much later in the war by that same name.

“Strange how the history here rhymes,” said Harada.

“The *Great Phoenix*,” said Fukada, looking at the ship with equally great interest and admiration. “That one is over 37,000 tons out there, but it could still make 33 knots if this one is anything like the original design. It was supposed to have belt armor up to 152mm, and two armored decks. I just hope they filled those voids around the aviation fuel bunkers. Look at those guns. We’ve got that single 127mm deck gun forward, well that baby has twelve 100mm guns, dual purpose, though they were really there for air defense. And she’s supposed to have over fifty 25mm guns as well, on seventeen triple mounts. That’s a lot of lead when they get to firing.”

“I’ll still put my money on the SM-2,” said Harada. “The enemy plane will be killed long before the pilot gets anywhere near us. I just wish I had a whole lot more than we’re still packing under that forward deck.” They had expended one on that target drone, two more against the American B-17s, and 33 in the battle against *Mizuchi*. He had 38 left, and 12 more SM-3s. So *Takami* could take down 50 enemy planes before they would be forced to rely on their close in defense Phalanx guns. Available rounds for those wouldn’t take them very far, and then all Harada’s bets were off, and those fifty 25mm AA gun barrels on the *Taiho* would be looking pretty good to him.

“Aye sir,” said Fukada.

“Looks a lot like the British *Illustrious* Class.”

“I think they may have taken a leaf from their book. Remember, a lot of early navy ships were built by the Brits, way back at the turn of the century. Admiral Togo’s ship, the *Mikasa*, was a modified *Formidable* Class battleship of the Royal Navy.”

“Those other two smaller carriers must be the *Hiyo* and *Junyo*. Can they keep up with us?”

“*Hiyo* was built on the hull of an old ocean liner,” said Fukada. “That’s her there, the *Flying Hawk*, and it will make a hair over 25 knots, and carry over 48 planes. *Junyo* there, with the oddly bent stack on the island, was built the same way. The *Peregrine Falcon* will have roughly the same stats as *Hiyo*, and these conversions were just finished recently, at least in our history. Looks like Yamamoto is debuting a brand new carrier division here, and herding all the older girls off for his Fiji operations.”

“Seems that way. Well, we’d better look after this bunch. Yamamoto was more than a little edgy over the losses to his fleet carriers. He’s already taken

as much damage as the Americans inflicted on him at Midway, and that battle never happened. Isn't this Indian Ocean raid a little late?"

"It was supposed to have been staged late March to mid-April," said Fukada, "a little Easter Sunday surprise for the British."

"You were pretty blunt with Yamamoto, particularly concerning the *Taiho*."

"He needs to know what could happen," said Fukada. "Our presence here, if anything, has to be about steering a course around the icebergs that sunk us."

"Icebergs? In the Pacific?" Harada smiled. "The only one we really need to worry about is still up north."

"How can we know that?"

"We can't, really, but it's a fairly good bet that this Karpov will continue to cover his Sakhalin Operation."

"You mean Karafuto," Fukada corrected. "I guess we'd best be thinking about it from the Japanese perspective these days."

"Well, Karpov has a few more months to lay in a store of supplies on that island to sustain his garrison there over the winter. From what I can gather, we moved fresh troops there as well."

"I spoke with Ugaki briefly while we were waiting," said Fukada. "He says that they've been making night runs from Sapporo and Ominato. They run up the eastern side of Hokkaido, reaching Karafuto after dark, where they can unload and slip away. If anything has to go by day, they throw up a fairly thick air cover. Frankly, I don't think Karpov can really mess with those operations. He can try standing off and using a missile or two, but the Empire has a hell of a lot more transport ships than he has missiles."

"Right," said Harada. "His primary threat is to important capital ships the Navy needs to sustain operations. That's why Yamamoto pulled all the best ships south. He was counting on us taking *Mizuchi* out, and when we let him down, that was his only smart option."

"If we had coordinated better we might have gotten that bastard."

"I'm not so sure. It was all going to come down to those eight SSMs we threw at him. Maybe if we did have four fleet carriers, and they threw a couple hundred planes at *Kirov*, then one of our missiles might have had a better chance to get through. Yamamoto was correct, two carriers were not enough, and we botched the one good chance we had."

“So how will we operate now?” asked Fukada. “What would you do?”

“Me? If he’s got a head on his shoulders, and I think he does, then he knows he’s really a lone shark when it comes right down to it. He’s a sea wolf, and that’s how I would sail that ship. Look, they have to know the history every bit as well as we do. It shouldn’t be hard for them to find out from signals traffic what the Japanese Navy is up to down here. So that’s where I’d be, skulking about like a wolf at the edge of a herd. I’d leave commercial shipping alone, unless I could get hard ID on troop transports. But better yet, I’d hunt Japanese carriers. That’s where this war will be won or lost. Yamamoto still has an edge. He knows that and he’s husbanding his resources here in the south and hoping he can dominate the waters around Fiji now. If I were this Karpov, that’s where I’d be, and soon.”

“And how do we operate?”

“Well,” said Harada. “We’re one toothless wolf now, but at least we can still bark. Face it, we’re a sheepdog now. Our job here is to spot the enemy with that SPY-1 system, and cry wolf. If they throw planes at us that look like they can do harm, then we take them down, while we can. I’ll be stingy with the missiles, but if we get pressed hard, I’m ready to use them.”

“Don’t sell the Japanese Zero short,” said Fukada. “Those carriers out there can defend themselves, and the British better know it.”

Chapter 6

That evening they had the pleasure of taking a trip over to the *Taiho* for the final mission briefing. There they met the bull necked Admiral Hara, and Captain Ichibei Yokokawa, former commander of the carrier *Zuikaku*. Kurita was also there, commanding the battleship squadron, and he gave them both a dark glance, still smoldering with inner anger over what had happened during the last operation. He still burned with shame, for instead of leading this attack, he was now subordinated to Admiral Hara. This was, in his mind, what he deserved by abdicating his own authority and listening to the advice of these two new officers, men he had never heard of before, but apparently men who were also close to Yamamoto. Yet that did not mean he had to like them, and he didn't, blaming them in part for his own perceived failure.

The Captains off *Satsuma* and *Hiraga*, and the other carriers were also present. Decked out now in official period Navy uniforms provided to them by Yamamoto, Harada and Fukada fit right in, but Harada had told his XO to say nothing unless spoken to directly. They would play the part of the dutiful officers now, there to receive orders, and not plan operations.

Hara told the assembly that Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa was presently in the Mergui Archipelago, a group of islands off the coast of the northern Malay Peninsula, about 200 nautical miles southwest of Bangkok. The navy had moved in a squadron of long range torpedo bombers there at Bangkok, the plane the Allies called the "Nell," and they could serve in both a recon and strike role.

"Ozawa has the four cruisers of Kurita's old 7th Division," he said, *Kumano*, *Suzuya*, *Mogami* and *Mikuma*. That last ship is fitted out with our latest search radar, capable of seeing planes out to 90 kilometers, or ships at sea 18 kilometers away. Ozawa also has destroyer Division 17 with him, and this entire force will be designated the northern scouting detachment, also tasked with attacking any enemy commercial shipping encountered."

Now he looked to Kurita, cleverly giving him face as he continued. "Vice Admiral Kurita has been promoted to commander of the fast battleship squadron, and he will accompany my carriers in support. Where would you prefer to position your ships?"

Kurita knew where he would prefer them, well out in front, but he had been ordered by Yamamoto to stay very close to the carriers, where his armor and AA defense would provide them with good cover. While Yamamoto did not expect to encounter an enemy using naval rockets here, he nonetheless wanted Kurita to begin adopting this tactical deployment, as it would now become the primary role for his fast battleships—defense of the carriers.

“I will be cruising right with you, sir, with one battleship off your port quarter, and the other to starboard.”

“Very well, *Taiho* will be honored to have such a strong escort.” He offered a shallow bow. “As for the new ship, *Takami*, it will be an advanced radar picket, also fitted out with our very latest equipment. Its mission is to report enemy contacts directly to me so that we may take appropriate offensive action.”

Now Harada offered a shallow bow in confirmation of those orders. He could still feel Kurita’s eyes on him, and did not speak, knowing he should not presume to stand with the Admirals.

“A small detachment of SNLF troops has already gone forward under cover of this weather to land at the enemy outpost of Port Blair on the lower Andaman Islands. They may have scout planes there, so it must be taken. We should arrive in time to cover that operation, and then, once the area is secure, the transports will follow us, and we will proceed to Ceylon for the main landings. Any questions?”

There were none, and so Hara continued. “It is just over a thousand sea miles to the Andaman Islands from here. I propose to cruise at 18 knots and therefore arrive within 60 hours, on the 24th of September. Once Port Blair is secured, it is then another 800 sea miles to our planned strike position off Southern Ceylon—a little under 48 hours sailing time. I presume we can be there by the 28th of September, with our primary mission being to neutralize any enemy naval forces, and to bomb their airfields and prevent them from interfering with our landings. Covering the transports will be a primary part of this operation. The landings will be scheduled for the period September 28 thru October 1st, depending on events. The entire operation should conclude by October 15th.”

That was a lot to bite off and chew, thought Fukada, though he said nothing, being the most junior officer present. Afterwards, when they were back on the launch heading for *Takami*, he expressed doubts to Harada.

“This force is much smaller than the one sent in the history we know,” he said. “Yamamoto sent five fleet carriers and a light carrier, with four battleships, seven cruisers and 19 destroyers. We have half the carriers and battleships, though we’re fairly thick on the lighter ships. That’s the *Tone* over there, behind *Taiho*, and I’ve spotted a couple light cruisers anchored with the *Hiyo* and *Junyo*. The real operation had no land assault planned. We’ll have to protect those troops, and handle anything the enemy throws at us, and with just 150 planes compared to the 350 Nagumo had. I don’t like it, but I wasn’t stupid enough to say anything in there.”

“You left out one ship Hara has that was never there before,” said Harada with a smile. “So we’ll just have to fill in for those shortfalls you mention. Those battleships look pretty mean as well. Any idea what the British will have?”

“Admiral James Somerville,” said Fukada for a start. “He was no slouch, and if the history here rhymes at all, he’ll have a pair of *Illustrious* class carriers, the light carrier *Hermes*, as many as five battleships and cruisers, and destroyers to match us pound for pound.”

It was actually worse than Fukada knew, for the intrepid Christopher Wells had arrived with HMS *Formidable*, and now the British would also match the Japanese plane for plane, though the edge in carrier operations and actual aircraft was still held by the Japanese. Yet it was going to be a much more ambitious operation than the historical raid, and with the odds much more even.

Harada was going to have to weigh heavily in the outcome, because Somerville had been alerted to the operations, and he was already making preparations to put out to sea and intercept it.

* * *

The move up through the Strait of Malacca was accomplished without incident. *Takami* was well out in front, her radars scanning the sea and sky ahead, sonars listening for any enemy that might be lurking beneath the sea. On the 24th of September she was steaming about 15 nautical miles off Port Blair, and they had a helo up to give them a look over the island. Nothing had been seen due north, and Fukada asserted that Somerville would not be there, but Harada knew they were in a different game now, and he was taking no

chances. Once they were confident nothing was east of Andaman Island, he turned west, intending to approach Port Blair and cover the landing operation there by those SNLF troops, with the light cruiser *Sendai*.

The port was at the southern tip of the big Andaman island. The smaller Rutland island nearly kissed the tip of Andaman, and some 20 miles south of that, was Little Andaman. Hara was taking his carriers south of Little Andaman Island, intending to move west of the long main island to begin his approach to Ceylon. Ozawa was heading instead for the 20-mile-wide channel, and that was where *Takami* would be heading soon.

It was then that the enemy showed his first teeth. A pair of fighters came out of the northwest, and Harada presumed they were simply out on a recon operation. He gave them a pass, knowing the enemy coast watchers at Port Blair must have already reported the approaching Japanese ships. But at 11:30 hours that morning, eight more contacts were seen approaching the island on the same vector at about 24,000 feet, and cruising at 195 knots.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” said Fukada. “That has to be a strike group. Probably torpedo bombers off Somerville’s carriers.”

“The ship will come to battle stations,” said Harada. “Stand up the SM-2s. We can spend a few to make sure those troops get ashore.”

The strike wave hit the western shore of Andaman Island at 11:38, and Harada gave orders to get after them at the 20 nautical mile range. The first missile was away at 11:40, just as the enemy planes, a group of 8 Barracudas, were descending to make their attack approach. They saw the contrails coming, yet much too fast to be from enemy fighters. Instinct serving, they continued their diving descent, thinking to get down and avoid the threat, but the missiles were not in any way fooled.

The crewmen on the Japanese transport *Tatekawa Maru* saw those contrails too, and now their blood froze, for they did exactly what all the rumors had been reporting, climbing into the sky, then descending. Several thought their ships were now under attack, and fearful shouts of *Mizuchi* were heard. Gunners on the cruiser *Sendai* even started firing at them, though they had no chance to hit those sleek arrows. Then to their great surprise and relief, the Japanese saw those rockets fly right over their ships, streaking towards the northwest. There they now saw the distant specks of enemy planes in the sky, and the gunners on the *Sendai* were retraining their weapons in that direction.

They saw the missiles home true, infallibly tracking and hunting those planes. Then the first exploded in a bright orange fireball, and the fearful shouts turned to cheers. "They have missed us!" one man shouted. "They have gone after their own planes!"

More explosions followed, and in those first hot minutes, four of the eight enemy planes were blasted from the sky, with one other suffering fragment damage from one of its dying comrades. The three remaining planes were getting lower, swooping over the long inlet of the bay and turning to come around and take the Japanese ships from the south.

"Three more," said Harada. "I know it's a lot to spend, but if they get one torpedo off it could deep six one of those transports. Then what good are we here?"

So they fired, three more precious SM-2s, and the result was inevitable. The missiles ran true, tracked their targets, and killed them, and Somerville would get the report five minutes later where he stood with Wells on the bridge of HMS *Formidable*.

* * *

"Sir," came the signalman. "We've lost them. All eight, sir. They're gone."

"Damn!" said Somerville. "They must have seen our recon group and got up fighters. We tried to bugger them, but they were on to us."

"No sir," said the man. "It wasn't Jap Zeros, sir. It was rockets. Bill Whitman was the last, and we heard it clear as day. Rockets, he said. The Japs have naval rockets!"

Somerville's carriers were in a very good position to stop this little raid by the enemy, about 90 nautical miles slightly northwest of Port Blair. *Indomitable* was in the lead, followed by *Illustrious* and then the flagship, *Formidable*. Six destroyers accompanied them, in three groups of two, and the cruiser force, with *Cornwall*, *Dorsetshire*, *Emerald*, *Enterprise* and the destroyer *Legion* were some miles to his southwest steaming for the channel.

"Indeed?" said Somerville, looking at Wells. "Naval rockets is it?" Virtually everyone in the fleet had heard of them. There had been lots of talk of the big battles fought in the North Atlantic, and the Med. But the rockets had always been on their side. To now learn that the enemy had them as well

was most disheartening.

“What do you make of this, Mister Wells?”

“I’m not quite sure, sir. I wonder if Admiral Tovey knows about it?” Wells had seen a good deal of action in this war. After saving *Glorious*, he had served briefly aboard HMS *Invincible*, and that was where he had his first glimpse of what this was all about. A mysterious ally had joined the Royal Navy, though Wells had never been aboard the ship. He knew it had Naval rockets as its primary weapon of war, but not much more. He certainly did not expect the other side had these weapons, least of all, the Japanese.

Somerville frowned, thinking. He was considering whether he should now launch a second strike, but reports arrived minutes later that the Japanese were landing troops at Port Blair. It was too late. All his planes would hit now were empty transports, as this was most likely a light SNLF battalion of Naval Marines. That would be enough to overcome the small garrison at Port Blair, no more than a company in strength, with a few 40mm Bofors and service troops for the port.

A day late and ten pounds short, he thought. But what we do know is that our enemy is out there, somewhere south of the Andaman Islands, and right where I expected them. We knew the Sunda strait was still too hazardous for them to use. So they had to approach through the Strait of Malacca, which is why I deployed here, and not farther to the southwest. I must move that way now, and seek to cut him off as he approaches Ceylon.

It was sound military thinking, but a maneuver he would soon find fraught with danger.

Part III

Pearl of Great Price

*“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls:
Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he
had, and bought it.”*

— Matt. 13:46-47

Chapter 7

It would come to be called the Pearl Harbor of the West, an effort by Yamamoto to smash the main British bastion in the Indian Ocean and drive them all the way back to Madagascar and Cape Town. If successful, it would be the perfect complement to the Army's operation then underway in Burma, which had already seized Rangoon, and now intended to drive the British back into India. After that, Japan would stand on defense there, and no further offensive operations against India or Africa were contemplated.

The Army's sobering experience in China had led it to determine that it could simply not invade another country as populous as India. There was too much ground, and the British would have an almost endless source of manpower for recruits that would likely flock to their banners after such an invasion. They already had great forces there in the British Indian Army, so it would be enough to drive them from Burma, and then secure that flank. Hara's Operation C was the naval element, aiming to supplant Britain's valuable naval bases at Colombo and Trincomalee with Japanese forces. From there, Japanese air power could pose a constant threat to enemy shipping in the Bay of Bengal, and force British convoys to Australia deeper into the Indian Ocean.

Hara's carrier group was 150 sea miles southeast of Port Blair when *Takami* fought its first defensive duel against those incoming Barracudas. They had traded seven irreplaceable missiles for eight enemy planes, which was the dilemma of these interlopers from the future. Every time they used the power they possessed, they grew weaker.

Receiving that report, Hara dispatched a pair of Zeros off *Taiho* to overfly the channel between the Big and Little Andaman Islands where Ozawa intended to take his task force. That was where *Takami* was now heading, and the planes would vector in on her coordinates, and then proceed northwest for a recon sortie. A little before 13:00 local time, the fighters made their rendezvous with *Takami*, and proceeded north.

"Come to 300," said Harada, noting the time. They were now going to run up towards the Sentinel Island, passing south of that and continuing on this heading to scout the way into the Bay of Bengal. Ozawa's Cruiser Force was

just under seventy miles due east as they made that turn, bound to make that same transit of the channel. Eight minutes later, that recon sortie produced results when the Zeros spotted large wakes combing the sea.

“Sir,” said Shiota, “I am monitoring a signal from Scout 1. They have numerous contacts, 60 to 70 nautical miles out. Several destroyers and cruiser class ships, and three carriers. They now report the enemy is launching planes.”

“Notify Hara immediately.”

“Aye sir.” Shiota passed the information on to Ensign Teppo. She was at the comm station to be ears, but any communications with the Japanese fleet would go through Teppo’s mouth. It still would not do to have a woman make such a call in 1942.

“Scout 1 heading home, but they have what they think is a flight of fighters in pursuit.”

“Don’t worry about them,” said Fukada to the Captain. “Our Zeros can outrun anything the British have, and out fight them if they do try to intercept.”

“Very well,” said Harada. “Track those fighters, but take them off the missile targeting board.

“If they do persist,” said Fukada, “they may get close enough to spot us.”

“Lieutenant Otani, how far out are they?”

“47 nautical miles at a little over 12,000 feet and now climbing through 12,500. Speed 160 knots. If they continue on their present heading they’ll pass about 10 to 12 miles east of us.”

“Given all these other contacts reported, we’re sailing towards a lot of trouble. Helm, let’s come to 270.”

“Aye sir, coming to 270.”

“Mister Fukada, what is our Admiral likely to do here?”

“He’s about 200 sea miles southeast of the reported position of those enemy carriers. His dive bombers could get up there, but the Torpedo planes will only have a 160 mile strike radius, so he’ll hold those until the range closes.”

They did not have long to wait before Fukada’s prediction was verified. Otani reported planes forming up over Hara’s carriers, at 13:40, and soon they began to head northwest.

* * *

Aboard HMS *Formidable*, Admiral Somerville was still stinging from the loss of those first eight planes. Enemy rockets—a most unexpected development, to say the least.

“Opinion, Mister Wells,” he said to his new Captain. A rising star in the Navy, Wells had just come over from HMS *Glorious*, the ship he had single handedly saved from almost certain destruction when it was caught unawares by the Twins in the Norwegian Sea.

“Well sir, and with all due respect, I don’t think I would want to be here just now, not with the whole of the Carrier Squadron, and not for Port Blair.”

“You would not defend it? There it sits, like a good pawn in the center of the board. From there we can get search planes well down into the Strait of Malacca.”

“True sir, but we have very little at risk there beyond that single utility, and we haven’t even got planes there. Its usefulness now is limited to coast watchers, and its proximity to both Singapore and Rangoon will make it a very difficult square to cover.”

“Do go on,” said Somerville, wanting to hear Wells out.

“So we’re the gallant knight, sir, posted here to cover that pawn. And you’ve sortied the Slow Force battleships like a rook to watch this file we find ourselves on, but Vice Admiral Willis can’t really offer us much in the way of support. We’ve called it the Slow Force for good reason. The Japanese won’t come after us with a surface action group. They’ll strike with their carriers. It’s a fairly good bet those Zeros are on a heading back to their mother ships as we speak, but we don’t know just how far out those carriers are. Our fighters reported one contact, a lone ship passing south of Sentinel Island, but no carriers and only that single ship.”

“Most likely a picket,” said Somerville, “which could mean the main body is southeast of Little Andaman.”

“Yes sir, but those Zeros have a good long mission radius, 800 nautical miles for a recon like this. That could put the enemy carriers anywhere from 200 to 400 miles out.”

“All the same, wouldn’t you get a strike group ready?”

“If I had to stay here, yes sir, I would.”

“Yet you would rather be elsewhere. I see...”

“It isn’t that I’ve lost my stomach for a fight, sir,” said Wells.

“Of course not.”

“It’s just that I would take the fleet west of Ceylon, and not operate here where they could cut us off by simply turning southwest now, and bottle us up here in the Bay of Bengal. We can’t get around the north tip of Ceylon. The reefs and shallows there make such a move impractical.”

“I see. Yet it was my thinking to keep the fleet interposed between the enemy and his obvious objective.”

“That would have been a fine strategy, sir,” said Wells, “assuming...” He hesitated now.

“Assuming what, Mister Wells? Go right on and speak your mind.”

“Assuming we could at least match them.”

That pricked at an inner sore spot Somerville had been rubbing himself for a good long while. He knew his carriers were tough with their armored flight decks, and he had good, experienced crews. But they did not have the planes to match those of the Japanese, nor the skill to match their pilots in a duel like this.

“A point well taken,” he said slowly. “Yet match them we must. Ceylon is at stake here, and we’ve got to stand up.”

“I understand, sir. Shall we get a strike spotted?”

“I think we should.”

“Aye sir. May I suggest a mixed group, Albacores and Fulmars armed with the 1000 pound bombs. Seafires in escort.”

“Give the order and the fleet will come to 265. The wind has cooperated with us today. As we turn into it now, this new course will also take us off that enemy sighting vector, and towards our Cruiser Force.” And it will also take us west, he thought, for much in what Wells had argued stuck to him now, and he was beginning to see the potential trap he might find himself in here.

“Shall I pass the ready order on to the other carriers?” asked Wells.

“Please do so. Have *Illustrious* post a squadron of Martlets on CAP.”

Somerville knew he was at a decided disadvantage here. They could *not* match their enemy. The Japanese Admiral now had his location, and planes that could reach him, while he had nothing more than a good guess as to the position of the enemy carriers. He had to be ready to launch in any case, but now he wanted the support of his cruisers and destroyers. The game was on,

but who would move next?

A moment later, they saw the enemy making their first big move. "Sir, Type 281 reports a large contact out at maximum range and bearing on our position. 130 miles out."

Somerville looked at Wells. "Here they come," he said. "Notify *Indomitable* to spot a second squadron of fighters."

"Sir," said Wells. "If those are strike planes, then they would be Vals or Kates. The former would probably launch no more than 250 miles from its intended target, the latter 160 miles. So I would now estimate their mother carriers to be somewhere here." He circled a finger on the plotting table. "If I'm right, sir, we can hit them. At the very least we should clear our decks of anything armed and get it airborne while we can."

"A wise precaution," said Somerville. "Make it so."

"We've got those two Martlets returning now. I'll launch as soon as they are recovered."

They saw *Illustrious* spotting aircraft as well, and *Indomitable* was already sending out a group of Martlets, the American Wildcats renamed by the British. Aboard *Takami*, the screens were suddenly alight with over 36 contacts, all designated friendly as the British planes launched and then were vectored southeast to look for the enemy.

As the British squadrons proceeded, there was one pair of Japanese Zeros out on long range CAP that spotted them, and went after a flight of Barracudas, downing one in a swirling fight that sent the others off in wild directions. The planes carried on, and the fact that they were not massed into one coordinated group would now weigh in their favor. A group of six Seafires with 1000 pound bombs were out in front, but by the time they had expended half their fuel, they had seen only a pair of enemy destroyers entering the gap between the islands. One by one, they began to reach Bingo fuel, and were forced to turn for home.

Other squadrons in the long train pressed on through the Channel, but more Zeros greeted them east of Little Andaman Island and they still had not spotted the enemy carriers. In the meantime, the enemy planes were drawing ever nearer, but Somerville's sideslip to the west now paid him good dividends. The Japanese Vals had carried on with the heading given them for the initial contact, and they missed the British carriers. For a time, they persisted north, a few chasing and attacking a lone British destroyer, before

the strike leader realized his error and turned. Seeing enemy planes to their southwest, he reasoned those must be British planes returning to their carriers, and turned in that direction.

The Vals were almost at the point where they would have to head home, but at least now they were headed the right way, the costly hunt to the north behind them. Finally, they saw the large wakes of enemy ships scoring the cobalt sea beneath them, and began to make their attack run. They were going to be too late. Most would be nearing Bingo fuel soon, but they pressed in to attack, with none of them dropping bombs on *Formidable* as the skies began to light up with Ack Ack fire. Most bombs fell wide of the mark, but one was very close, no more than 150 feet off the starboard side of the ship. The blast sent shrapnel raking over the flight deck, damaging several Fulmars spotted there, and effectively putting them out of the game.

Crews ran to move the planes below decks while others were already rising on the elevators, this time armed with 1000 pound bombs. The last of the Vals swooped through the flak, then the formation swarmed off like angry bees, heading south. They had put one stinger into their enemy, and those results were none too good considering that these were veteran pilots. Two stubborn pilots still had bombs when they got the order to return to base, but they could not go without attacking and bear the shame of having to jettison those bombs. Ignoring their fuel situation, they turned, braving the flak, and bored in on that carrier.

They each got off two 125kg bombs, but all fell well over 500 feet from the carrier. Wells and Somerville had dodged the first enemy attack, and now *Formidable* had frantically launched another group of Fulmars to try and follow those Vals home and find their unseen enemy.

Down south, the other squadrons of Barracudas had still not sighted the Japanese carriers, but they did find what looked to many like a battleship below. It was actually the Heavy Cruiser *Tone*, out in front of Hara's group by some 30 miles. The British had come that close to finding the carriers, but now, in desperation, low on fuel, they decided to take the bird in hand. The first two Fulmars put their bombs nearly half a mile from the target in their haste, and the gunners aboard *Tone* actually laughed at their enemy. Most of the other British squadrons got hung up about 40 miles north of *Taiho*, where Hara had posted his long range CAP. The slashing attack of the Zeros was enough to so disrupt the enemy formations, that the strain on their fuel was

now forcing them to turn for home.

So it was that these initial probing attacks saw both sides frustrated, shadow boxing with an enemy that neither one could clearly see. But Hara now had a very good idea where his enemy was, and he was determined to strike again with the remaining daylight. At 15:40 he gave orders for all carriers to launch a second wave. He would get those planes up and off the decks just as a group of eight Zeros were returning. As his squadrons headed out, he saw more Zeros launching from *Hiyo* as ordered to replace his defensive CAP. They were soon in a wild fight with anything the British had near *Tone*, as the Fulmar was a fighter bomber, and those pilots too far off to get an attack in, could jettison their bombs and take on the role of that fighter. Both side would take losses, but the net effect was that Hara would effectively parry and block the last punched the three British carriers had thrown at him.

An hour later, by 16:40, the first groups of that strike wave had already arrived at the last reported location of the carriers, and then turned west to look for those long wakes. The British could see them coming on radar, and they would surely vector in all the other groups in their train.

“We had better look to our defense,” said Somerville.

“*Indomitable* reports they have six Seafires ready on deck for immediate launch. *Illustrious* has two more on ready standby. I’ll have them scrambled at once. As for us, I’m afraid we’ve just got the Barracudas left below deck.”

“Leave them there for now. But we must be ready to arm them at a moment’s notice. Not just now, however. Particularly with enemy planes coming at us. Gentlemen, it may soon be every man for himself, but we’re likely to take the heat first, trailing the other two carriers as we are now. Let’s get off this heading and see if we can dodge another arrow.”

“Aye sir,” said Wells. “Helm, come to 320 and ahead full.”

Chapter 8

Those eight Seafires were not going to be enough. The long range CAP already up for the British had pounced on one of the squadrons of Vals, and took down five in a heated duel, but now they could see lower flying formations of Kates, and more Vals coming in higher up. They radioed home, telling their comrades the enemy was throwing the kitchen sink at them.

This time Somerville's dodge would not work.

It was Lieutenant Ichihara off the *Taiho* that saw the carriers first, leading in two *Shotai* of B5N2 torpedo bombers. At a little after 17:00 the enemy planes swooped low over the water and began their attack runs, racing in at very high speed, which was a hallmark of the Kate. Soon the long wicked wakes of the torpedoes were clawing through the water, and one struck *Formidable* amidships, blasting through the torpedo bulwark and achieving partial penetration of the main hull.

The resulting explosion buckled the second deck where those Barracudas sat in open parking, but thankfully, only two were then armed with torpedoes, and neither of those were damaged. Several flak guns on that side of the ship took bad splinter damage, the crews cruelly clawed by shrapnel caused by the explosion. A fire broke out and a call came up to the bridge to report minor flooding amidships.

"They've gone and stuck one to us," said Somerville coolly.

"It seems they have, sir," said Wells.

The buckled deck had also thrown both elevators slightly off their bearings, and the engineers were now trying to see if they could keep them operational. Above, chaos reigned over the scene, with planes seemingly everywhere. Vals were swarming over *Illustrious* off their port quarter, and the few Seafires they got up were battling the enemy against steep odds. Between their efforts and the AA fire, at least eleven Vals were taken down in that wild attack.

Bombs were falling around *Indomitable*, escorted by the destroyer *Napier*. Vals that had already dropped their bombs then bravely went after the Fireflies. Planes were cartwheeling into the sea on every side, and losses were beginning to mount. Then two Vals got through the intense flak and

both were able to put 125kg bombs right on the armored flight deck of *Illustrious*. Neither were able to penetrate all the way through to the hangar deck, but now came a group of eight Kates off the *Junyo*, bearing down on both the other two British carriers. One would hit the *Illustrious* aft with a torpedo that would put most of her remaining planes out of the game for a time when the explosion sent fire and smoke through the hangar deck. The minor flooding would be controlled, and the fires suppressed, but she was out of the fight at a critical moment.

By 18:00 it was all over, the smoke trailing up into the sky from all three British carriers. *Formidable* had it the worst, her fires spreading to ignite an aviation fuel bunker, with a violent explosion rocking the ship. Wells was thrown from his feet, Somerville holding on to the binnacle as the ship swayed, then righted itself. The Admiral came to his Captain, extending a hand.

“Mister Wells,” he said. “I am beginning to see the wisdom of your earlier arguments. We’ve no business being here now, and perhaps I was rash to put us in harm’s way, but that was my charge. Now we must look to our ship.”

A call came up that the damage control parties were having great difficulty getting the fires under control. The ship’s speed was exacerbating that effort, but if they slowed down, those fast enemy cruisers could find them. The reality of what had just happened finally hit Wells like a blast of cold air.

They were going to lose her.

That was the only thing running through his mind now—no more strategy, and nothing of chess moves as he had put it to Somerville earlier. His ship was going down. The Admiral, being much more experienced at sea, also knew the worst. He edged a bit closer and spoke to Wells, his voice low and controlled.

“I think we should see to getting the crew off as best we can. I’ll see to some documents from the plotting room. You see to the men and boats.”

“Very well.” Wells had a defeated look on his face, and Somerville saw it. The Admiral put his hand on the Captain’s shoulder.

“It happens, Mister Wells, and this is my fault, not yours. We get some of theirs, and they get some of ours. I’m afraid the two of us will likely look like a pair of wet dogs when they pull us out of the sea. *Nestor* is close by, and

Napier. They can lend a hand. I'll have signals sent to all other destroyers to muster on our position. As for *Illustrious* and *Indomitable*, they should continue west with all speed until we can sort ourselves out. Rear Admiral Boyd is on *Indomitable*, and he can manage. I'll want him to effect a rendezvous with Admiral Willis and the Slow Force. Those battleships can put up a good deal of flak if the enemy comes looking for more trouble. Then I think the whole lot should move southwest.... Where we should have been all along."

It was as much an effort to shore his Captain up as it was an admission of his own fault. The two men had a lot on their backs in the brief time they had collaborated. There was Mers-el-Kebir, and the dreadful consequences of that action that sent France firmly into the enemy camp. Then there was the action off Dakar, and the Canary Islands, where they got back in the game. This time, another island of great importance was at stake, and Somerville was beginning to doubt if they could defend it.

For his part, Wells realized the Admiral was trying to buck up his morale, but that he was also giving him his intentions as to future operations. When one went over the side in a situation like this, it was never certain where he might end up. The Admiral's launch was readied for senior officers, but Somerville wanted to see the men off first. He had over a thousand souls on his mind now.

This was a blow that could cost us Ceylon, thought Wells. Every plane we're carrying will go down with this ship, and what we have left on the other two carriers may not be able to hold the enemy off. If I had it to say, I would get those planes to bases on Ceylon, and get those last two carriers well west to safe waters. We weren't ready to mix it up with the Japanese carriers like this, but what else could we do but our best?

Paladin, *Panther*, *Hotspur*, and *Foxhound*, would soon arrive on the scene to lend assistance as *Formidable* began to list heavily. There would not be enough boats for all the men, but those six destroyers would be able to pull the lion's share out of the sea. In the end, they would lose only 76, mostly those already killed in the attack itself, and some to mishaps during the evacuation. That was the only solace Somerville could take from his fate, but the real sting was that Britain had lost a very valuable ship, and his carrier force as a whole was now much diminished as a defensive foil.

In fact, *Indomitable* had repaired most of its damage, though *Illustrious*

was a little worse off. Both carriers were still seaworthy, and after being pulled up onto *Indomitable* three hours later, Somerville now had to decide what to do. They had 44 planes left between the two carriers, and Wells sought him out to offer his own thoughts.

“Sir, if the enemy is still coming, and I think he is, then wouldn’t our remaining planes be better served ashore? *Hermes* has twelve more at Trinco, but that just leaves us 56 aircraft. We could be facing twice as many enemy planes from what I saw in that attack. If they joined the Hurricane squadrons ashore, our defense there might be thicker.”

“Sound thinking, Wells, but rather emasculating to order our boys landward like that. We’ll run west for Trinco, and then take stock of the situation.”

“They can’t sink the island, sir,” Wells put in one last argument. “We can hold back a few fighters on the decks, but move most of the strike planes ashore. The carriers would become a scouting force to try and locate the enemy on his approach, and they might do better southwest of Colombo. That way, if we have to retire, we’ve a clear route and open sea. As it stands, if we linger off Trinco, we can only go south to get around the island, and that could put us in a fix if the enemy is heading southwest from their last position.”

Somerville nodded, smiling inwardly. The man was already thinking about tomorrow, when he hasn’t even got the seawater out of his ears today. I like that.

“I’ll keep your suggestion in mind, Mister Wells. Now then... I think we’d best present ourselves to Captain Troubridge and inform him the flag is now planted firmly on his ship. I’ll post you to the plotting room, and do sound off if you have anything more to say.”

“The plotting room... Yes, sir.” Wells seemed a little despondent.

Somerville gave him a look. “Don’t worry, Welly,” he said, using the nickname he had heard the other men hang on Wells. “We’ll get you another ship. All in good time.”

Dusk, 24 SEP 42

Off to the southeast, Admiral Hara was also counting the eggs left in his nest. When darkness settled over the sea, *Hiyo* had 27 planes, *Junyo* 22, and

Taiho 65, for a total of 114 aircraft now available to carry on the operation. It had been a costly day, but the pilots were still jubilant. They had hurt their enemy much more, and knew they had sunk at least one of the three enemy carriers.

This cruiser Yamamoto sent me was at least of some use, thought Hara. It covered that landing at Port Blair well enough, took down that first enemy squadron, and sent me a lot of useful and accurate information as to the location of the enemy carriers. So I will continue to post it as a picket, only this time I think it will operate with *Tone* and her seaplanes. Together they will make an excellent scouting force.

Losses were heavy. We lost twelve fighters, twenty-three dive bombers, but only six torpedo bombers. Forty-one aircraft gone... but I still have enough to carry on. I will move southwest now, for if the enemy retires west, that course gives me every chance of cutting them off. Tomorrow should see us in a very good position, and I will post Ozawa's force about 30 miles north of my position as a screen.

The short night was ahead of them, and the service air crews worked feverishly to repair damage, refuel, and rearm all the planes scheduled for operations the next day. That night, the Japanese also flew in four seaplanes to Port Blair, and they began preparing for scouting operations. One plane went up that night for a long range patrol, scouting west to look for the British at their last reported position. With the night clear it was able to spot the wakes of several ships gleaming in the wan light of an evening crescent moon, low on the horizon as it began to set.

Hara got the report at 22:15, one carrier, one battleship, with numerous destroyers, and additional light units spotted further southeast of that position. It was immediately clear to him that the British were now running on a parallel course, possibly to attempt to cover Trincomalee, or perhaps in an effort to reach Colombo. He immediately gave orders for all fleet units to increase speed, ahead full, and the race was on.

Ozawa's 7th Cruiser Division was about 65 miles northeast of his position and within 45 sea miles of the closest enemy contact. Confident in night actions, he signaled Ozawa to attempt to engage. At the very least, he might get better information on the size and composition of the enemy force. So at 22:30, the cruisers turned on a heading of 265, along with the 17th Destroyer Division. Even as they turned, contact was suddenly lost with that seaplane

out of Port Blair, and this further reinforced Hara's suspicion that the enemy carriers were there.

Hours passed as the day slipped away beyond midnight. The moon was down and darkness made the sea a sable cloth beneath increasing low clouds. With each passing hour, the positions of the enemy ships grew more uncertain, and no word had come from *Takami*, which had turned on a heading of 295 to look for the enemy. Finding nothing, Ozawa resumed a heading of 242, again running parallel to the carriers, but now over 100 sea miles to the north.

As dawn came, Hara altered his course 20 points to starboard, coming to 256. He immediately ordered fighters up to look for the enemy fleet. Departing on a heading of 320, they overflew Ozawa's cruiser Force at a few minutes before 06:00, continuing on to the northwest.

Nothing was seen.

Frustrated, and thinking the enemy may have elected to run for Trincomalee, he nonetheless decided to check due west of his position, sending up another pair of Zeros off the *Hiyo* at 06:20. Then, at 06:37 the scouting group off *Taiho* suddenly radioed a sighting report—enemy carrier!

All that night, the British had moved towards the east coast of Ceylon. That first seaplane that had spotted them got entirely too curious, descending to an altitude that prompted the battleship *Revenge* to open up with its flak guns. A hit damaged both the engine and radio, sending the plane down.

All the destroyers that had come to the aid of *Formidable*, were then dispatched to Trincomalee with the survivors, save the senior officer party that had come aboard *Indomitable*. Somerville had cruised on a heading of 225 all night, intending to skirt very near the curving southeast coast of Ceylon. He was taking Wells' advice to heart now, thinking only of how he might save his remaining carriers. His intention was to get down past the southern tip of the island at Koggala, where a small seaplane base was fueling up two Catalinas for their morning patrol.

All that night, Cruiser Force, with *Cornwall*, *Dorsetshire*, *Emerald* and *Enterprise*, had been steaming about 80 miles to his southwest, in a very good position to become entangled with Hara's fleet, but they had seen nothing in the inky darkness after moonset.

Hara had moved to a position about 220 miles east of Koggala on the southern tip of Ceylon, and though he did not yet know it, he had already cut

his enemy off, as Wells had feared. That first contact with the enemy came when Scout 1 off *Taiho* reported a carrier about 100 nautical miles to Hara's north, and then a second carrier, 45 miles ahead of the first, and 116 miles northwest of *Taiho*. If those reports were good, both were in strike range, but why had the enemy separated? One must have battle damage or engine problems, he assumed, and ordered his planes to begin spotting to attack immediately. He elected to go with his torpedo bombers, all 17 then available on *Taiho*, and a fighter escort of two *Shotai* would launch from *Junyo*.

At the same time, *Takami* sent over information that there were two airborne contacts, most likely search planes originating from Koggala. They were on headings that might find the Japanese within the hour, and so Hara elected to go after them, ordering *Hiyo* to send up a *Shotai* of three more Zeros off *Hiyo*.

Takami watched the little drama unfold on its screens, the Zeros taking a heading that brought them right over the ship. At that point, about 07:50, the contact was 58 miles off, and *Takami* messaged the Japanese pilots, guiding them in. While this was happening, Scout 2, was able to refine its sighting report to three cruisers and a pair of destroyers. Thinking these must be an advanced screen, the planes turned to follow the enemy wakes in the opposite direction, thinking they might point them to the main body.

As the little engagement ensued, the Catalina, flown by one Leonard Joseph Birchall. Already famous in Fedorov's history for spotting the approach of the Japanese fleet, he was out to double down on that fate line. All he had seen up to this point was a single cruiser, leaving a medium wake on the sea. He took it for what it was, a lone picket forward of the enemy fleet, and pressed on.

Then the Zeros found him.

Coming out of the eastern sun, barely visible, Birchall had no chance against those swift winged fighters. On the first pass they raked the wing and set the left engine afire. He struggled with the yoke to try and get the plane down, his only thought now being to land in one piece.

"Send out that we've found the Japanese," he shouted over his shoulder to the radioman. "Send 'Leading screen at our position.' They'll sort the rest out."

Down he went, the smoke from that engine getting worse with each passing minute. The Zeros could have followed, but they stayed aloft,

reporting back to Hara that the contact had been shot down. Birchall would descend until his smoking trail vanished into clouds, and eventually land his Catalina on the sea. In the meantime, Scout 2 off *Taiho* had followed those wakes and found the British carriers, which scrambled fighters to get up and challenge them when the Zeros were spotted. The report came back: Main body, three battleships, two carriers, five destroyers.

Chapter 9

07:15 Hours. 25 SEP 42

After both sides ran all night, on roughly parallel courses, round two of the battle was now underway, and the situation if viewed on a plotting table looked very confused. *Gurēgōsuto*, the Grey Ghost as *Takami* was now being called, indicated the presence and position of the leading British carrier sighting that had been spotted by Scout 1 earlier that morning. They believed there was also a battleship present, and at least three destroyers, that this enemy force was following right in *Takami*'s wake, perhaps 32 sea miles behind.

Ozawa's position now put him directly behind the other reported carrier sighting, following its wake. He was soon given permission to take his 7th Cruiser Division and intercept. *Suzuya* raced ahead, a fleet footed ship at 33 knots. The other cruisers followed, guns loading for action. Tense moments passed, the watchmen straining their eyes at the binoculars, but nothing was seen in the low marine layer.

The two fleets, now widely dispersed, had nearly collided with one another, but the darkness and low weather had obscured all until sunrise. Even the planes had difficulty finding contacts through small breaks in the cloud cover, which meant there might be difficulties with the strike wave. Hara looked at his watch, then leaned heavily in his chair on the bridge of *Taiho*, watching the Kates lining up for takeoff. He would probe with this first punch, a jab at the enemy's chin. If all went well, he was ready to launch a much heavier strike on short order.

* * *

It was no longer a question of whether they should have been west of Ceylon. Now it was a question of whether they could get there safely at all. All through the night, Somerville had deliberately elected not to fly any cover. He knew where his enemy was going, and Wells had called it exactly. Now, with the sun up, he looked at his hand and found few cards worth playing.

He had 44 planes between the two carriers, but they were mostly fighters. His strike planes had suffered heavily in the action of the previous day, and he had lost a good many of the new Barracudas when *Formidable* went down. He had only 15 of those left, and that was all the sting at his disposal. All of his dual purpose Fulmars were gone. The rest were the 16 Martlets, 9 Fireflies and 4 Seafires, all new model planes that had only recently been delivered to F.A.A. squadrons. He considered arming them with bombs, but knew that was useless. None of those fighter pilots had ever been trained for naval bombing.

Again Wells' admonishment came to mind—get the planes to bases on Ceylon. If the enemy were to find him this day, and strike his carriers again, all these planes would surely be lost. It was all a sad testimony to support Wells' other assertion, that the fleet should not have been where it was at all, and that the effort to try and ambush the enemy landing at Port Blair was ill-considered. He ordered every Barracuda armed and aloft at once, with six Fireflies. Even as he did so, his radar crews reported a flurry of long range contacts loitering about 125 miles to the southeast, on a heading of 160.

He had found the enemy carriers, for those were obviously planes forming up for the attack. As the seconds ticked away, he had to decide what to do with those Barracudas. Trinco was 150 nautical miles to the northwest, and they could still reach that base. Colombo was a good deal farther, about 225 miles, and over the high central mountains on Ceylon. The enemy carriers were 125 miles to the southeast, but how many of those 15 planes would get through, and would they find a deck waiting for them if they made it back? If he sent them to Trinco, they could still act in defense of that base, and Wells was correct, the Japanese could not sink the island. But he would forfeit anything they might do to defend his carriers by bringing harm to the enemy.

He decided. They were heading for Ceylon.

When the startled pilots got that order they were quite put off. What were they doing up here if they were simply going to run for home when the going got rough? Just before they turned, one saw the long wake of a fast ship through a break in the clouds, and reported a single cruiser, requesting permission to attack.

Somerville relented. "Very well," he told the signalman. "Order them to go on in. If that is an enemy cruiser, it's right on the trail of *Illustrious*. Maybe this will buy her some time."

Damn, he thought. *Illustrious* has a gimpy leg after that action yesterday. She's been falling farther and farther behind all night, and without proper escort. I'll detach a destroyer to look after her. There's another thousand souls on that ship to worry about now.

By 08:00 hours, the last five planes aboard *Illustrious* were off the deck and climbing into the grey skies, three Fireflies and a pair of Seafires. That group of Barracudas went after their cruiser contact, which was the forward ship in Ozawa's force, *Suzuya*. Some never got close enough. The Zeros sent on ahead to sweep the target area for enemy cap had already spotted them, and fell like hawks on doves, their talons sharp with bright MG fire. They would get three of the seven Barracudas in that group, but the other two would get to *Suzuya*, and with sheer will to put hurt on their enemy, they braved the thickening flak and got their torpedoes in the water.

Both ran true.

Suzuya rolled with a heavy explosion, then another as both torpedoes hit. The results were flooding amidships that could not be controlled, and the British, as intimidated as they were at the approach of the Japanese fleet, had finally drawn blood. Only two of the seven Barracudas survived, and decided to follow their original orders, heading off for Trinco.

Now, her decks and hangars empty, *Illustrious* was running for all she was worth, finally working up to 29 knots. Air alert was sounded, and the crews began opening up on a group of low flying enemy planes that began circling their prey. *Illustrious* had 48 two-pounder AA guns on six Octuple mounts, and they began chopping up the sky, their chattering fire accented by the dark roses of the bigger 4.5-inch dual purpose guns. They would put down at least five Kates, but one scored a hit, aft, where the flooding threatened one of her propulsion shafts.

Like jackals nipping at the legs of their prey, the Kates had slowed the carrier from 29 to 21 knots again, and the second squadron of torpedo planes was now vectoring in. Those five British fighters were in a swirling dogfight higher up with the Japanese Zeros, so they could not help. It would be Hara's pilots against the gunners on *Illustrious* now, and the balance of power in the Indian Ocean was riding on the outcome. The Kates saw the thin stream of grey smoke from the carrier, and turned to follow.

Her speed still falling off, *Illustrious* was also starting to go into a slight list to port when those last nine Kates found her and made their attack.

Gunner Jake Morton saw a pair of planes swoop down to line up for their attack. He was right on them, his 2-Pounders hot with fire, and had every confidence he would take both down. One had already been hit, its left wing streaming a thin train of smoke. Then, with a wrenching thud, his gun mount jammed. Someone had failed to mount a round properly, and at that critical moment, the stream of fire he had been putting out was cut off.

The other gunners could not hold them at bay, and soon the seas were streaked with the wakes of enemy torpedoes. Expert in their craft, and with a very deadly and accurate weapon, the Japanese would find their mark again that morning. The carrier rocked with two more explosions, and like *Formidable* the previous day, she would sink that same hour.

The outcome of the entire engagement had come down to one moment, but it was not Jake Morton on his 2-Pounders. It was Gunner's mate Ed Wicker, two hours earlier, when he had failed to properly replenish that gun mount magazine after a long, sleepless night. Yet no one would ever know that. It was one of a thousand Pushpoints on the history, hiding in the seeming insignificance of a billion simple moments that made up that flow of time. Wicker's woe was Morton's mishap, and the end of *Illustrious* along with any hope that the Royal Navy could ever sortie here again to defend Ceylon.

When Somerville got the news that he had lost her, he lowered his head, rubbing his brow. His defense had been rash, ill-managed, and now he had lost two ships Britain depended on greatly for her continued survival. He was learning the hard lesson that the American Admirals Fletcher and Halsey had been taught when it came to carrier duels with the Japanese. If you locked horns with the Imperial Japanese Navy, be ready to suffer losses. They were just too good at this deadly art of war, and not to be ever taken lightly. He knew nothing of Ed Wicker at that moment, but stripes on his cuff meant that he would certainly shoulder all the blame for his lapse.

Meanwhile, *Takami* had been monitoring the complex situation on her SPY-1D radars. Otani spoke up, a warning in her tone. "Sir, that skunk I reported on a minute ago is getting close, and they're three big mothers behind it, cruising at 20 knots."

It was Somerville's screening force, the light cruiser *Caledon* with destroyers *Fortune*, *Vampire* and *Vendetta*. The bigger ships following were Vice Admiral Willis with his battleships on close cover for *Indomitable*. The

sea around them was already erupting with water splashes from the guns of the heavy cruiser *Tone*.

“Our escort is on the job, said Harada. Bring us about and steer 180. We’ll open the range. Monitor the situation and if *Tone* needs assistance, we’ll go to our deck gun.”

Tone would not need assistance. Her ten 8-inch guns were more than a match for *Caledon*, and the three destroyers broke off to the west, running towards distant Ceylon. The battleships could never get close enough, for *Tone* was a very fast ship.

“Sir,” said Shiota. “From the signal traffic I’m hearing, I think we got that carrier—*Illustrious*,”

Fukada smiled, rubbing his hands together. “Two down and one to go,” he said.

“Do we have a fix on that last British carrier?” asked Harada.

“No sir,” said Otani. “When we broke south away from those destroyers we lost the contact. Predictive plot still has them on the board, but that is not reliable information if they’ve turned. My best guess is that they’re at 350, probably 40 nautical miles out from our position—over a hundred miles from our carriers. Their second DD screen just slipped over the horizon and went yellow. The only firm red contact I have now is that cruiser at 250.”

“Probably *Cornwall* or *Dorsetshire*,” said Fukada.

“Bring us about,” said the Captain. “We’ll chase that ship off if it has any ideas about trying to support that carrier. Feed Hara your best guess as to the carrier’s position based on that predictive plot. It’ll take them time to arm and spot for a strike, so factor that in.”

By 10:15 the brief, but violent engagement had ended, and the surviving planes had been recovered. Somerville was by no means out of the hot water, and now he called a conference of Wells, and the ship’s Captain Troubridge.

“Our own speed is falling off,” he said. That splinter damage to the boilers yesterday was bound to make itself known. Pressure is off and we’re down to 22 knots. At this rate, I don’t think we’ll get around Ceylon. Our only chance might be to turn north now, and make for Trinco. From there we go on to Madras, and hopefully under cover of the planes the RAF moved there. It was a footrace, gentlemen, and they won it. *Illustrious* paid the price.”

“If we turn now we might slip away,” said Troubridge.

“Mister Wells?”

“Agreed sir. If we could get up to speed I’d say press on, but under the circumstances, better to head north. We might open the range enough to cause them difficulties, but I would expect at least one more air strike today, and possibly two.”

“Then make it so, Captain, and signal Vice Admiral Willis, and all close supporting units to break off north. Any ship farther out is to carry on and attempt to reach Addu. We’ve been given a good hard beating here, and one I’ll not soon forget. Let’s just hope we can save this last carrier.”

“Don’t forget *Hermes*, sir,” said Wells. “She’s still at Trinco.”

“And with twelve planes,” said Somerville. “Well, we’ve got less than two dozen here. Are the fighters on deck?”

“Eight Martlets and a pair of Seafires ready.”

“Good, leave them there. If we launch, they’ll just come up on the enemy radar and let them know exactly where we are. So we skulk off north, and hope for the best. We’ll scramble the fighters if the enemy tries to hit us again. As for the battleships, we can’t wait for them, as much as I might want their added firepower for defense. Let’s see if we can work up more steam and run like the wind. In the meantime, keep your fingers crossed, and hold tight to those rabbit’s feet.”

* * *

Hara now considered his own options. He had sunk a second carrier, but the other was reported some thirty or forty miles further on, yet that contact was now over 90 minutes old. His forward scout group with *Tone* and *Takami* was following a British heavy cruiser to the west, and that was now their only solid contact. The day was young, and he could get planes up to look for the enemy again, which is what he decided to do. Until he knew more, he would continue due west towards Koggala. He had not yet used his dive bombers, knowing the enemy had armored flight decks like *Taiho*. Now he began to consider using those planes to strike the British bases. He could always spot torpedo planes on one of the other carriers in the event he found the British fleet again.

Using information provided by *Takami*, he sent another scouting group northwest, looking to find his enemy running down near the coast of Ceylon.

By 11:10 he had found a heavy cruiser, still running southwest as before, but there was no sign of the carrier. Or any other ships. Where might they be, lost in this low marine layer? Might they have turned north?

By noon, with no further word, he was beginning to think his quarry had turned to run for Trincomalee. We must have hurt them very badly yesterday. Today they did not even dare to draw their sword. *Suzuya* fell as she ran down the enemy, but after that, we have not seen a single enemy plane.

An hour ago, they should have been within easy strike range, but now that begins to change. I will ignore the ships fleeing west. My mission was to attack Colombo. Ozawa still has three heavy cruisers, and four destroyers. I will order them to look for the enemy to the north. For now, it is time to get the dive bombers on deck and prepare to hit the enemy port. In another hour we will be close enough, and the planes can fly right over the island

At 1:30 the planes were up and on their way. Somerville on *Indomitable* was just able to see them on their long range radar, but he was unwilling to launch fighters unless he knew the enemy had found him out. The last of his fighters were on deck, engines running, ready for takeoff, but he held them tight, waiting.

“Sir,” came a message from the radar crews. “We’ve lost contact with those enemy planes. They must have moved to the northwest. There’s nothing on the scope heading our way now.”

Somerville nodded.

“Get yourself to the radio room,” he said. “Have them send out a coded warning to Colombo. The Japanese are coming.”

Somerville looked at Wells, a look on his face like a man who had just received a severe dressing down. “Mister Wells,” he said. “We got very lucky just now, and must never forget it. You and I might have shared the dubious distinction of having been the only two officers in the Royal Navy to ride a sinking ship down twice in the same battle. They’re going to hit Colombo next. Thank God for low clouds when you need them.”

“Will we make for Trinco, sir?”

“Too close,” said Somerville. “We’d better run all the way up to Madras. Number 67 Squadron has Hurricanes at Alipore, and 146 Squadron has more at Dum Dum. I’ll see about getting them moved to Madras.”

“We be in a bit of a box, sir,” said Wells.

“Yes, I know that, but the Japanese can’t stay here forever. Their fleet

will have to withdraw to Singapore, and then we'll slip out to sea."

"Will they come for Ceylon sir?"

"Very likely, but I'm afraid we won't be able to do a thing about that. It will come down to the fight on the ground there now. At our first opportunity, I'm taking the fleet to Addu; perhaps all the way west to Madagascar. We'll need considerable reinforcements if we have any hope of showing our faces in the Bay of Bengal again soon. God only knows where we'll find them. I've a lot to answer for here, and had I sat with you earlier, and listened to your good advice, things might be a good deal better. As it stands, this whole sad affair can be laid at my feet, and I'll spend a good long time writing my report."

Hara hit Colombo the following day, then swung around the Island and bombed China Bay at Trinco on the 27th. That was to be the main landing site, and so he committed all his fighters to a decisive battle with the Hurricanes of the British 30th Squadron and a few Fulmars of F.A.A. 261 Squadron. Even a section of old Blenheim Bombers from 11th Squadron got into the act and tried to bomb Taiho, albeit unsuccessfully.

In these actions, *Takami* had operated with Kurita's battleships, out looking for any further sign of the enemy fleet south of Ceylon. No enemy ships were found. Ozawa looked for the British up north, but never found them, and was fortunate in that. His three heavy cruisers would not have had a good time with Vice Admiral Willis and his three battleships. The fight over Trincomalee was costly, with the Japanese losing another 12 planes, but they had established air superiority by nightfall. Satisfied that he had command of the sea and sky, Hara ordered the invasion task force to proceed.

One day later, on the night of the 28th of September, the Japanese landed the 11th Regiment, 5th Division, on the beaches near Trincomalee. Churchill's worst nightmare had come true, and the battle for Ceylon would now begin on the ground. 98th Indian Regiment of the 34th Division had been posted there, with a battalion of the British 16th regiment to stiffen the ranks. As in so many confrontations with the rugged Japanese infantry before, they were no match for the seasoned veterans of the 5th Division.

Trincomalee fell on the 1st of October, but there had only been enough shipping to lift this first regiment along with supplies adequate for the first two weeks. Hara departed for Singapore, where he planned to then refuel and escort the 21st Regiment to Ceylon for the landing at Colombo. In that

interval, a chastened and disheartened Somerville slipped out of Madras and made a run for the Indian Ocean, but not before the three old battleships under Admiral Willis paid a visit to Trinco, protesting the Japanese occupation there with their 15-inch guns. No effort could be made to try and defend Colombo from any subsequent Japanese landing, and no further troops were available to send there.

In spite of his greatest fears coming to life with this Japanese invasion, Churchill was persuaded to use that same interval to pull out anything he could. A bird in hand was worth two in the bush, and Madagascar would be that bird. *Indomitable* lingered briefly, while the remainder of the 16th Brigade, with 99th and 100th Indian, and 21st East African were moved by sea at night. Three days after the last men got off, the Japanese 21st Regiment arrived to claim their pearl of great price.

Part IV

The Mission

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”

— Mahatma Ghandi

Chapter 10

Karpov had every reason to be restless with the situation that had developed on Sakhalin Island. His 32nd Siberian Division had been successfully landed, seizing the small port of Okha in the north, and the nascent oil fields in that region. They then pushed south along the western coast, while his air mobile units lifted by airship landed small groups ahead of the main advance to cut the rail line the Japanese had built and impede any enemy effort to move troops north. The Magadan Marine Regiment was able to slip into the Tatar Strait and seize the vital ferry site of Lazarev, which was now his logistical link to the mainland. Other irregular forces were operating there, fast moving cavalry units, small militias, and native tribal groups loosely allied with his cause.

North of that area, the 40th Siberian Division had been landed on the coast at Toron and Chumikan, and it was to have pushed up the sandy and winding course of the Uda River to the Zeya River, but with no roads to speak of, only one regiment had made the long and arduous journey, establishing a series of frontier outposts behind it, and then returning to the coast. It was now evident to Karpov that getting inland from that wild and undeveloped coast would be a logistical nightmare. His airships were largely carrying the burden of moving supplies, but threats posed by the appearance of new German airships was cause for some alarm, and he was now being forced to keep at least three airships at Ilanskiy.

While Fedorov was off on his AWOL mission to that place, Karpov's anxiety was very high. He fretted, paced, was constantly on the radio to his brother self, asking for news and berating Tyrenkov to bring the fugitive to justice one way or another. They had searched high and low for any sign of *Irkutsk*, with no results. Tyrenkov's intelligence network kept an ear on the ground for any news of where it may have gone. It was suspected that the airship, and Fedorov with it, may have fled to Soviet Russia, but all his operatives there could produce no evidence that had happened. Not one among them had any idea that Fedorov was, at that moment, literally right beneath their feet in the very heart and center of Karpov's web of security—

Ilanskiy—only he was hidden by the shadowy cloak of 34 years of time, there but not there, like an unseen wraith or spirit haunting that railway inn.

* * *

When Mironov came down those stairs he had only one thing on his mind—escape. A fledgling revolutionary, he had already been arrested and imprisoned by the Okhrana for allegedly distributing propaganda materials. This very journey was an attempt to get as far from Tsarist authority as he possibly could, a journey east on the Trans-Siberian Rail. He had decided to visit relatives in Irkutsk, but after that, he had it in his mind to head west and south, to the Caucasus, a place he had heard much about as a boy, Vladikavkaz. It was a small town in the foothills of the mountains west of Grozny and south of the Terek River. There he would help organize the Bolshevik cells of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and work as a journalist.

In truth, his revolutionary spirit had been born much earlier, when he left the small boarding school of his youth and moved on to the Industrial Institute at nearby Kazan, in 1901. Then a lad of just 16 years, he experienced that flowering of his young self that comes to many at that age, becoming more independent and often questioning authority, while at the same time, sewing a few wild oats, as young men sometimes do. There he lived in a student hostel, rent-free, as a gift from one of the Society Board Members who approved his studies at the institute. That man's wife ran the hostel, though young Sergei repaid that kindness by having an affair with her, the boy of 16 then summarily leaving the hostel to board in the town with two friends at the end of that year when he learned the woman was pregnant. She closed the hostel shortly thereafter, and later gave birth to Sergei's illegitimate baby girl.

More than one young man has found himself in that sort of embarrassing situation, and more than one young man ended up doing what Sergei did after that—leaving the place and abandoning both the mother and child, never seeing them again.

Once he was reprimanded by a teacher for refusing to write an essay on scripture he did not believe in. Once, while touring a local factory, he had the temerity to directly question the owner's right to a life of wealth, comfort,

and security obtained on the backs of the workers who labored so hard beneath him. And so, from rebellious student questioning the established faith, to a young man questioning the existing social and economic structure of the world he was growing up in, Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov would soon find more than one place his feelings about these things could be expressed.

Two years later, in 1903, the students at the institute began to organize protests when one of their ranks was arrested by authorities and mysteriously died while in custody. Sergei fell in with the protestors, and was much influenced by the general anti-Tsarist sentiment simmering in the country. He graduated from the institute in Kazan in 1904, then went to Tomsk in Siberia to seek entry into the Tomsk Technological Institute for higher education. He was there when the Tsar's police fired on citizens in St. Petersburg on January 22, 1905.

That incident became known as the Bloody Sunday Massacre, and did much to raise the temperature of the slowly simmering revolution. Sergei joined a sub-committee at the school to help organize a street protest to the event, which was widely reviled throughout Russia. The following month was just two days old when Kirov was arrested for the first time, taken into custody with a group of other students who were planning a further protest.

Young Sergei Kirov refused to cooperate with interrogators, or to implicate any other student he knew. He was eventually released in April, and went right on with his revolutionary activities, distributing fliers, meeting with worker groups, fomenting a strike among railway workers near Tomsk. By May of that year, Japan's Admiral Togo inflicted a disastrous defeat on the Russian Navy in the Strait of Tsushima, which caused national uproar. Workers on the Trans-Siberian rail line staged strikes and walkouts all along the line, and the lad who would become Sergei Kirov was right in the middle of it all. So he was no stranger to that fabled rail line, and knew all the ins and outs of traveling there.

In 1906, with martial law declared when Kirov was 20 years old, he was arrested again in a Tsarist crackdown on all these revolutionary activities. They claimed he was running an illegal printing press, though it was never found. Instead they cited him for spreading hostilities between classes, and he was sentenced to 16 months in prison in Tomsk. He had only been released in June, 1908, when he started his journey east on that same rail line. For the next 18 months, almost nothing is known of his whereabouts, except that he

eventually turned up in Irkutsk. No one knew of that fateful meeting he had at Ilanskiy with a man named Fedorov, or of the stairway at Ilanskiy where his curiosity saw him climb those stairs at a most opportune time.

And no one knew this time that he was about to have yet another meeting with Fedorov, only now the strange figure from the future was not there to deliver a warning that might one day save his life. This time Fedorov had come to end his story, then and there, as a desperate act to try and reset the world he had come from in 1942, and perhaps expunge the sins that now darkened his own soul, atoning for all he had done to give birth to that world.

While traveling east, Mironov stopped at Kansk, resolving to continue on the next train. He, too, wanted to see a bit of the Great Auto Race that was nearing that location. Then, on the day of the strange explosion and fire in the sky to the northeast, he had what he now believed was a very close brush with the authorities again. That strange man in the dining room, claiming to be a soldier, had aroused his suspicions. At first he had thought to share his table with the man, to make it seem that he was nothing more than an innocent traveler. But when the soldier made such a hasty retreat to the second floor of the inn, Mironov's curiosity had been aroused. He wondered if the man was an agent of the Tsar's dreaded secret police, sent to follow him now that he had finally been released from prison.

That's what they would do, he thought. They release the little fox, but keep the dogs close at hand. My colleague, Popov, fled this way as well. I must get in touch with him one day, but not now. They will want to follow me, see where I might go, and to whom I might speak. Did they honestly think I would be so stupid as to try and contact fellow revolutionaries or other members in the party so soon after my release from that prison? No. The smart thing for me was to do exactly what I was planning—find relatives, find family. That would be the perfect cover for any travel I undertake, and then, when things settle down; when I've had time in Irkutsk to have a good look around and make sure no one is watching me, then I can contemplate another move.

The train is due in at Kansk today, probably bringing more tourists hoping to see a bit of the Great Race. The American team has already moved on, but the German team is still here. That will attract a lot of attention, along with all this other commotion. There are already security men here, and so the thing to do is head east, not west to the train at Kansk. If I slip off to the east,

I can always board the train at another village down the line. But what if those men are on the train? So be it. I've done nothing wrong here—except that reporter. Yes, that could be it. I was talking with that English reporter, a foreigner, and a member of their press. That could land me in a bit of a stew. Is that why that man came over—Fedorov? And what did he mean with that whispered warning about St. Petersburg?

“...never come up this stairway again. Understand? Get as far away from here as you can.” He remembered the urgency in Fedorov's voice, the look in the man's eyes, as if all the world was at stake. Then that strange look of anguish, that moment's hesitation, and the torment in his eyes as he leaned close, taking hold of his arm.

“Do not go to St. Petersburg in 1934! Beware Stalin! Beware the month of December! Go with God. Go and live, Mironov. Live!”

And the night.... The moon. How could I have left this red sky morning one moment, and found it so dark and quiet the next, and with that ghostly moon? Perhaps that was only the rising sun I saw, obscured by smoke from that fire in the east. What was that man saying about 1934, a year so far away in the future? Who was this Stalin he spoke of? Why should I be wary in December? What did he mean that I should not go to St. Petersburg? He was speaking as though... as though he saw some distant future in the world that had not yet come to pass, some far off doom, for his tone of voice clearly carried the edge of warning.

That only increased the rising sense of fear in his own gut. Yes, slip away east, he thought. That was what he must do now. The train will come east tomorrow after all this ruckus settles down. The German race team will leave, the tourists will have had their eyeful, and even that reporter will probably try to follow them as they head west to Khabarovsk and beyond. But I will continue east, wait for the train, and get on at the next town.

The nearest village was Staynyy, only ten kilometers east along the line. He could get there in as little as two hours, and he did. The little depot there wasn't much, but that was where he stayed, sleeping on a bench. Tired and hungry the next morning, he was now looking forward to the arrival of the train, where there would be warmth, food and more comfort, but something else unusual happened that morning—something very strange.

The sky was still aglow to the northeast when he saw a gleaming shape emerge from a cloud. It hovered in the sky, drawing ever nearer, fixating his

attention. Mironov had never seen such a thing, and to him it would have been like the arrival of a UFO in the skies, so he was quite curious. It was the second time that curiosity would get the better of him. He saw that the craft was lowering very near the ground, and only a few kilometers north of Staynny, so he could not help himself. As he approached the craft, he saw something lower from the great shape, which he now surmised was a massive airship. Such craft would not begin to fly commercially for another two years, but Mironov had heard of them, and reasoned that this was what he was now staring at.

The small metal basket lowered, and a group of men got out, all carrying weapons, which prompted Mironov to crouch low behind a tree. Three men started off west, back towards Ilanskiy. The remainder began to fan out, eventually disappearing into the trees around the small clearing. Soldiers... What would they be doing here? Might they be secret agents of the Okhrana? Is this how they were able to suddenly appear in these isolated places, seemingly everywhere. Did they travel in those massive airships? How is it he had never seen anything of the kind before?

He would soon be even more confused, for some time after the three men departed east, he had decided to head back to the little depot at Staynny. Just as he rose to head back, there came a whooshing sound, then two, then three explosions. He turned, amazed to see the airship burst into flames, terrified to see the massive ship come crashing down into the clearing, burning fiercely. He watched, spellbound, frozen in place by the spectacle of that disaster. It was a point of divergence, for this had never happened to him before, and the history of these moments was now being rewritten. Would seeing this event change him in some unfathomable way? What happened next surely would.

Just as Mironov turned to retreat to the rail depot, he was confronted by a dour looking man in a black beret and soldier's uniform, and he was holding a dangerous looking rifle, aiming it right at Mironov's chest.

"Stand where you are," the man said coldly. Then he touched something at his collar and spoke again, seemingly to someone else. "Komilov to Zykov. We have a witness."

* * *

After questioning the reporter, Thomas Byrne, Fedorov and Troyak had

searched the entire inn, and all through the railway yard area. People were arriving from Kansk, where the train took advantage of the delay to re-coal. The visitors had come to see the German race team, hearing they had stayed at the inn at Ilanskiy, and hoping to see the grand sendoff that morning, before they started heading east. That complicated their search, but it also gave Fedorov a chance to question several people, asking them if they had seen a man by Mironov's description heading west on the road towards Kansk.

Preoccupied with the persistent red glow in the sky, no one could help him, and he was beginning to think his mission would now become an impossible search for Mironov, who could be anywhere by now. No, not anywhere. He had to be close at hand.

Think, he told himself. He can't fly. The train is still at Kansk, and that is his only way out of here. I doubt he would have secured a horse or carriage, so he must be somewhere close by, and we must keep an eye on that train.

Then he got word from Zykov and his heart leapt. The Marines had been cleaning up the wreckage site, and Zykov called on his service jacket radio to report they had a man in custody that looked very much like the one in the photograph Fedorov had shown them.

They had Mironov!

Chapter 11

There he was, the same man, Fedorov. He was just sitting there at the same table where he had thought to share his breakfast with the man the day before. Yet somehow he seemed different, older, quiet, a sullen mood on him, as if some darkness had fallen on him, a shadow of gloom. The soldier that had herded Mironov in saluted.

“Thank you, Corporal,” said Fedorov. “See that every entrance is secured.”

Mironov looked around the room, seeing the broken windows boarded up, and noting the lower door to the back stairway was closed. His heart beat faster as he eyed that door, remembering how he had crept up after this very same man the previous day. That was a mistake, he realized now, for this man was obviously Okhrana. Perhaps he had been following him all along.

“You again,” he said, a note of accusation in his tone.

“Me again,” said Fedorov, realizing the utter strangeness of this moment. For him it had been long years, decades in the future, living in the world he had created the last time he saw this young man. There had been plans and battles, and so many losses. He had lived through that impossible time in the desert when Kinlan arrived. He had consorted with Wavell, Alexander, Churchill. He had campaigned in Lebanon and Syria, fought battles on the sea, faced the wrenching strangeness of Paradox, and the second coming of *Kirov*, when he found himself there, inexplicably there, the one man who could remember it all. Yet for Mironov, it was only a matter of a day or so since he followed me up those stairs.

“Won’t you sit down?”

“Why should I?” said Mironov. “So that you can interrogate me? That’s what this is now, correct? You had plenty of time when you got hold of me yesterday. Why are you so curious today? Ah, yes, you wanted to see if I would go to anyone else here. You wanted to try and ferret out any possible contact I might have. I know your kind well enough.”

There was that same defiance, the hardness of rebellion already alive in the man, thought Fedorov. “I know this is what you might believe,” he said, “but no, I am not a member of the Okhrana, or of any other authority

connected to the Tsar.”

“Then why the uniform?”

“Please... Sit down with me, and we can talk. I will answer all your questions. I promise.”

Mironov folded his arms, frowning. Then he walked briskly over to the table, drew back the chair, and sat down. “Very well,” he said. “If you are not the secret police, then who are you? Why that uniform? Why all these men with guns?”

“We are soldiers... Sailors actually. Those men are Marines off my ship, and we have come here on an important mission.”

“What has it to do with me?”

“Everything.”

“What? I have done nothing wrong. I was falsely tried and convicted on a technicality, a trumped up charge because they had no evidence of any other wrongdoing. They tried to say I was operating an illegal printing press, but they could find no such thing. So they just made something up—said I was causing tension between the classes. I served over a year for that, and now I’m a free man. They even let me go early, but now I’m beginning to see why. They just wanted to see who I ran to.”

“I know... It all seems that way, but it’s not. I assure you. It’s something else entirely.” Fedorov had his eyes averted, unable to look Mironov in the face. He had one hand on the table, the other resting in his lap, where he held a drawn pistol, concealed by the shadows. His heart beat faster as he realized what he now had to do—the timely cruelty he had spoken of with Karpov.

“If you only knew everything that has happened,” he said sullenly. “If you only knew how long it has been since you last laid eyes on me, and what has become of the world... But it was my fault, not yours.”

The man seemed to be speaking as much to himself, and Mironov did not understand. “Yesterday you told me to get as far from this place as possible,” he said. Then you ran on with something about St. Petersburg in the future—in 1934. Yesterday you told me to go, to live. Well, that was exactly what I was doing, heading east to wait for the train and get clear of all these tourists coming to see the German race team off. Now why are you and your men so keen on sitting me down again for this nice little interview? What is it you really want to know? Go on—out with it!”

Fedorov raised the hand he had on the table, pinching the bridge of his

nose. "I shouldn't say another word," he whispered, again, more to himself than Mironov. "What I have already said was damaging enough. But then again, if I finish what I came here to do, then what does it matter? What does it matter?"

"There you go, talking in riddles again. Look here, I've done nothing, and you have no right to detain me here. Either charge me with another false crime and be done with it, or let me go as you did yesterday."

"Mironov..." It was the first time Fedorov had used the other man's name, and he regretted it the moment he said it. It would only make him real, a person, a human being, and that would make it so much more difficult. But he could not help himself. It was as if he was compelled to say something, anything, to justify what he was now planning to do, to explain it to Mironov, and by so doing, be absolved.

"What if you met a man and then later found out that he did something that caused a great deal of trouble, something ruinous, something catastrophic, even if he, himself, had no inkling that he had done anything wrong at all... Even if he was completely innocent at that moment."

Mironov's eyes narrowed. "You are suggesting I have done something—the crime you are planning to charge me with? What is it this time? You might as well spit it out, for you've already decided I am guilty. You've tried and convicted me long ago."

The truth in Mironov's words stung Fedorov, for Mironov was absolutely correct. He was here to convict him, the summary judgment being the cold steel bullet in the gun beneath the edge of that table. He could feel his palm wet with sweat, a slight tremble in his hand there.

"Well, what is it this time?" Mironov insisted.

The anguish on Fedorov's face was plain to see. "You would not understand," he said. "Yes, it was not your doing, at least not at first. I'm the man who should be tried and convicted here."

At that moment, something occurred to Fedorov. What if he were to repudiate everything he said in that impulsive moment years ago—a day ago to Mironov. He could just tell him to forget what he said, that it was nothing, something he was saying to himself, nothing to be bothered about.

The futility of that was immediately apparent to him, but the one side of his mind that was still the man he was before all this happened kept up its plea. That was the man who flinched at the first plane Admiral Volsky

ordered shot down. That was the man who stood, glassy eyed and remorseful, as he watched *Yamato* burn on that dark night in the Pacific. That was the man who stood in stunned silence when the news of Volsky's death came in the middle of his heated conversation with Karpov on the bridge, and the man who wept in his cabin later that day, knowing it was all his fault.

How had he become *this* man, driven to come here again, by any means, and with this pistol in his hand. How had he become the man who fired five missiles at Orlov, the one who gave that order to take down *Irkutsk*, killing everyone aboard, even though his inner self inveighed against him for that callous act. How had he come to the cold calculus of death, finding reasons, justifications, imperatives that would muzzle and imprison the man of conscience he had always been—the man he still was.

Yes, he knew that, deep inside, he was still a man of integrity and conscience—he was still as innocent as Mironov was at this moment, but the words Karpov had spoken to him as *Yamato* burned now scored his soul. “It gets easier,” he had told him—easier to kill, easier to do the heartless thing he was planning now, easier to find reasons, arguments, justifications; easier to rationalize everything and explain it all away.

But that wasn't true, at least not for Fedorov. At his core and root, he was not that kind of man, and now, as he sat in this moment of destiny, gun in hand, the dark agent of absolute change, time's assassin, he knew he was not the man who could murder Mironov. He could not do what Leonid Nikolaev did that day, emerging from the rest room on the third floor of the Smolny Building, the heart and center of Bolshevik power in Leningrad. He had a pistol with him that day as well, hidden in his pocket, and there was Sergei Kirov, walking towards him down the long hall, his footsteps ringing out fate's toll with every step. He could not look the man in the eye, turning away towards the wall and fishing in his pocket for a cigarette, fumbling for a match.

Kirov passed him by, continuing on towards his office, and Nikolaev followed. Just as Sergei turned onto the side hallway, the assassin pulled out his pistol, and without a second thought, aimed and fired. The bullet struck Kirov right on the back of his head, and he was dead before his body hit the polished tiled floor. There, in that moment, the world that Fedorov had been living in, struggling with the lines of history so wrenched and bent by the simple fact that Kirov had lived, all came oozing out like the dark red blood

from his ravaged brain.

Yet Fedorov had spoken, just one impulsive moment born of the admiration he always had for Kirov, born of the compassion that lived in his heart at that moment, born of hope. Fedorov had given his warning, only thinking to spare Kirov's life. It had never occurred to him, in that brief moment, that Kirov would discover the reason behind that warning; that he would find it at the top of that single flight of stairs, right here at Ilanskiy. Kirov would learn the name of the man who would pull that trigger, the day and hour of his own demise, and the name of the man who may have given the order—Josef Stalin. That alone may have been reason enough for what Mironov did in that cold prison cell in Baku. Instead of Nikolaev, it had been Mironov with the fate of the world in his hand in the shape and form of a pistol.

Now it was Fedorov.

If I do this thing, he thought, then I gift the world again with the darkness and depravity of Josef Stalin. I sit here in the hope that someone with a heart so blackened will be the one man strong enough to stop Volkov, to stop Hitler, and to build the Soviet Union that would one day build the ship that brought me here.

That was the cold chain of logic and reason he had forged with Karpov, link by treacherous link. Yet now, as he sat there, with that gun in his trembling hand, a great and yawning doubt seemed to encompass his soul. How could he know any of that would ever happen? Wasn't it all speculation, all well-reasoned conjecture that was really nothing more than a wild guess, driven by that one coiled link of hope he had put in that chain?

How could he know that Stalin would live, rise to power as he did, find and defeat Volkov, ruthlessly enforce his will on the world? And how would it all become that world again at the top of those stairs—Stalin's world, the purges, the gulags, the death ships in the icy Tatar Strait? Was it true that Russia would fall beneath the iron tread of Nazi Germany? Was it inevitable that this man before him, young Sergei Kirov, would falter and fail? Couldn't they win the war? Couldn't they prevail?

He could hear the man he once was, weeping within, as he cried out all these reasons, pleading for mercy. For at this moment, everything Kirov said was completely true; he was innocent. Yet now came that voice of cold Karpov logic—the death of one innocent man could save the lives of

millions. Yet even Karpov had faltered with that.

What did he mean with that last urgent call, cancelling the mission and ordering me back to the ship? What twisted thread of dark possibility had he pulled from the loom of their sinister conspiracy? Fedorov thought he knew what it was. Karpov could not bear the uncertainty of rolling those dice one more time. He could not bear the thought the he might lose the cards he held so stubbornly in his hand, laying down his strait, and seeing Josef Stalin's evil grin as he laid down his full house.

No, Karpov had decided that he would stand on the ground they had built together, and fight his war to whatever end that might come. Karpov had decided he could *win* that war, or die trying. His cruel and self-centered logic had simply decided it was better to rule in the hell they had created than to serve anywhere else. That was why he wanted to recall me, thought Fedorov. He simply could not bear the thought of losing everything he had striven so hard to grasp in his greedy hands—*Kirov*, the ship, the power he could wield with it, the Free Siberian State, and all his dreams of the world that would come after this war.

Kirov...

He stared now at the man his ship had been named for, the young eyes flaming with indignation, feeling his spirit, seeing in him the temperament that would take him to the crest of the wave of revolution that was only now gathering strength—Sergei Kirov. Yes, one day the world would build a ship in this man's name, a ship born of fire, and steel, and the strangeness of some otherworldly thing that had fallen from the darkness of outer space, only yesterday....

Do it now, an inner voice urged him on. Do it before you think another thought. Become nothing more than reflex, mindless synapse, the twitch of a finger on the trigger of fate and time. Become Samsonov. Become the hiss and snap of a missile leaping up from beneath that long sea washed deck. Become judge and jury. Become the assassin. Become death itself.

His hand trembling, his face wrenched with pain, he raised up his unsteady arm, and Mironov saw the gun.

Chapter 12

Mironov saw the gun.

His eyes widened with sudden shock, and he instinctively leaned back, his body tense as coiled steel. So that was it, he thought. No interrogation, no trumped up charges, no trial and term in prison. He was to be executed, here and now. That was why all these men with guns had come here. But why? What had he done? And why would this man want to kill him now, when only yesterday he pleaded with him to live?

Something was wrong. Mironov could see it in the shaking of Fedorov's arm, in the torment of his eyes. Then he saw the other man slowly raise up that pistol, but he was pointing it at his own head! His hand quavered, and there were tears welling at the corners of his eyes.

Then Mironov moved. It was impulse, synapse, Samsonov.

"No! Don't!" Mironov lurched forward, taking hold of Fedorov's arm just as that pistol went off with a loud report that stunned them both with its closeness. The chair gave way and the two men tumbled to the ground. The door burst open and in came Troyak, his assault rifle leveled, and seeing what was happening he simply fired a burst at the boarded windows, the bullets ripping through the wood, sending a rain of splinters onto the floor.

The pistol had slipped from Fedorov's hand, the hand that Mironov had been struggling to stay. Troyak strode across the room, three quick steps, and collared Mironov, pulling him up off the floor and away from Fedorov with one arm, the hard steel of his rifle pressed into the young man's back.

"Are you alright sir?" he said, seeing things were clearly otherwise with Fedorov. The bullet had just grazed his chin when that gun had fired, and he reached his hand to feel the place, seeing the thin trickle of his blood.

"Zykov! On me!" Troyak shouted over his shoulder, and the lanky Corporal came running in. "See to the Captain."

As Zykov rushed to Fedorov's side, he could see the stain of blood on his service jacket, but quickly surmised that he was not seriously injured. He reached into a pocket of his jacket, pulling out a ready wound patch and pulling off the outer packaging to apply it to the nick on Fedorov's chin.

Slowly, as the ringing in his ears subsided, and his senses gathered,

Fedorov sat up, then started to stand. Zykov helped him to his feet, with an ‘easy does it.’

“What in God’s name happened here?” he said to Fedorov, stooping to fetch the fallen pistol.

He tried to save my life!

That was all Fedorov could reason in that moment. His eyes were fixed fast on Mironov, the young man’s eyes still smoldering as he squirmed in the steely grip of Sergeant Troyak.

I was not man enough to do what I came here to do, and just coward enough to try and kill myself and end this misery. But he stopped me. Sergei Kirov could have done anything in that moment, anything, but his only instinct was to stop me from killing myself—me, the man he suspected as an agent of the Okhrana, come here to harry and harass and judge him. *He tried to save my life....*

Taking a deep breath, Fedorov composed himself, the eyes of both Troyak and Zykov heavy on him now, their concern obvious. He could see the question in their eyes, and how they were waiting for him to tell them what was to be done.

“Easy, Sergeant,” he said to Troyak. “This is not what it seems. It was just an accident. Corporal, take that pistol outside and return to your watch. Gather the other men in the front room. We’re moving out. Sergeant, you can release that young man.”

“But sir—”

“That is an order, Sergeant. He means me no harm. None of this was his doing. It was just an accident. See to your men. Make certain that all the equipment we brought is accounted for, and find Orlov. I want the entire squad assembled in the outer room in ten minutes. And for now, I want those ten minutes here with Mironov.”

Troyak was not comfortable with the situation as he saw things, but he knew an order when he heard one, and also knew another ‘but sir’ wasn’t going to get him anywhere. Something had clearly happened here, but he would not sort it all out now.

“Shall I send in a guard?” he asked, his eyes still looking Fedorov over searchingly, as if to make sure there were no other wounds.

“No Sergeant. I’ll be quite alright. Just see to the men, and make sure there is not so much as a ball of lint from our trousers left behind. We move

in ten.”

“Aye sir.” Troyak moved now, synapse, reflex. He saluted and then gave Zykov a nod of his head, saying nothing more.

There were no other wounds, at least not in the flesh, thought Fedorov. He stooped slowly, picking up the chair, Mironov’s eyes on his every move, dark and serious.

“Sit with me,” said Fedorov in a low voice, but he could see Mironov hesitate. “No interrogation,” he said again. “I... I must thank you for what you just did. I....”

Fedorov sat down, his head lowered with shame. Mironov stood there, watching him for a moment, and then he walked over, sitting down at the table, and the two men sat there a moment, just looking at one another in silence. This time, the pistol was gone.

If that inner voice from the man Fedorov once was could not stay his hand, this man could. He could not bring himself to kill Sergei Kirov, and like that awful moment that had come to Karpov on the weather deck of the ship as he fired his pistol at Tovey’s distant cruiser, Fedorov had fired off every last argument and reason in his mind, and the last he kept for himself. He would take his own life in payment for the terrible change he had brought to the world. Mironov was innocent.

“I know you will not understand what I am about to tell you,” said Fedorov quietly. “I came here to kill you.... Yes... that was why that pistol was in my hand. But when it came right down to the moment, I simply could not do this thing. You are correct, Mironov. You have done nothing wrong, and I could not sit here as your judge and executioner. I’d sooner take my own life than do that.”

Mironov nodded, his face betraying his confusion. “Kill me? But why? You were ordered to do so by the Okhrana?”

Fedorov managed a wan smile. “You might say that,” he said. “Let me just say that it was not anything you did that put that pistol in my hand. It was simply fear of something you might do—one day.”

Mironov was beginning to understand. “They couldn’t find the printing press,” he said, “but they know it is out there somewhere. They are probably still looking for it.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov, “and one day they will find it, and arrest you again. You will see the inside of a prison more than once in the days ahead, but you

will survive.”

“They want to kill me? For that?”

“No... No, not for that. It is very complicated. How can I explain?”
Fedorov looked over his shoulder, finding the silent door shut tight at the bottom of those stairs.

“Do you see that door?”

“Of course.”

“You remember what I told you yesterday? I said that you should never go up those stairs again. Get as far from here as you possibly can, but you and I both know that won’t happen. In a moment I’m leading my men up to the second floor, and you are free to go. No harm will come to you, but I know exactly what you will do. You will not be able to resist the urge to follow me, for curiosity is a very powerful thing. You have already seen far more than you should have, but what is done, is done.”

“I don’t understand,” said Mironov. “They ordered you to kill me, but you refused. Well, my friend, I can help you now. Come with me, you and all your men. There are places we can go where they won’t find us. You’ll see.”

Mironov knew it was risky to say what he did, but something in the desperation he saw in Fedorov’s eyes told him that this man was not a dark servant of his enemies. He did not know about the other men, but this one could be a new ally for the cause, for the revolution. The man was clearly conflicted, and unwilling to carry out his orders, so much so that he thought to take his own life instead. He was ripe fruit for the revolution.

“No, I cannot go with you. I have duties elsewhere. Now Mironov, listen carefully. Remember what I warned you about yesterday—do not forget it. In a moment I will take that stairway up, and you must not follow me this time. It is very dangerous there. If ever you find yourself near this place again, you must be very careful, very cautious. You will find what seems like madness at the top of those stairs, and one day you will understand. You will reach a place there where I can no longer go. You will see a world there that I was once born to, but now I am an outcast, and I can never return there again. No, I live in another world now, and I must return there to carry on the fight. I thought I could change things—change everything, reset the clock and the whole world with it, but it seems I cannot. So I will leave with my men in a moment, and we will return, to do the only thing left for us now—to fight and win. You fight too, here and now. You win through, Sergei. I have every faith

in you. I know you will surmise what to do, and have the strength to do what I could not.”

Mironov looked at him, a puzzled expression on his face, not understanding, but sensing some deep truth in the man’s words and tone, sensing some ordained fate that was his, and his alone to find and grasp. It was a feeling more than a thought. It was a reflex, just like the impulse that prompted him to stop this man from raising that pistol to his own head to end his life. Something about him, this man named Fedorov, was right and good, and he could see now that he meant him no further harm. He was telling him the truth with every word he spoke, though he could not sort them through to find their meaning.

“So I will say it to you one more time,” said Fedorov, “just as I said it to you before. Do not go to St. Petersburg in 1934! Beware Stalin! Beware the month of December! And if you ever walk that stairway again, be as careful and cautious as you possibly can. No matter how dark and forsaken you may ever come to feel in the days ahead, no matter how hopeless the situation may ever seem, know that you can win. You can *win*, and you must never give up. Go with God now, Sergei Kirov. Go and live, Mironov. *Live!*”

Fedorov had sat at fate’s game table, hearing her ash grey whisper, seeing the bony hand push another stack of chips out onto the center of the table. Fate had called Fedorov’s bet, and now he would do the same, doubling down. He had said what he had said. It was over and done, and now he would return to the world he had created, and he would return to the war. Every thought of fixing the world and redeeming his own darkened soul was now banished from him. He had only one cause in his heart now, one mission. They were going back up those stairs, come what may, and they were going to fight that goddamned war, and win.

“Sergeant Troyak!” he called, giving Mironov one last smile as he stood up. The Sergeant was quick to respond, his eyes still laden with concern.

“Sir?”

“Are the men ready?”

“Yes sir, all assembled, just outside the front entrance. All equipment accounted for. I’ve double checked everything.”

“Good. And Orlov?”

“He’s there. I found him flirting with one of the maids.”

“Then it is time we get out of here, and leave this place to the innkeeper.

We've caused enough ruckus as it stands. He's locked that door there. We need it opened, and I don't have time to find the man. See to it."

Fedorov called the other men in, and looked them over. "Alright," he said. "We're going up these stairs. It may seem stupid, but bear with me. This is very important, and you must all do exactly as I say. I want the squad in single file, and every man is to take a firm hold on the shoulder of the man in front of him. Sergeant Troyak will lead, and secure the upper landing when he gets there. The rest of you file on up, and remember, nuts to butts, just as Symenko had it. Keep physical contact with the man ahead of you at all times. Come on then."

"What about him?" Zykov pointed to Mironov.

"What about him? Our business with him is concluded. Let's move."

The Marines had bemused expressions on their faces, but orders were orders, and Troyak waved at them to form up. Fedorov had some reason for all of this nonsense, and this likely had something to do with that story he told us, he thought.

Mironov watched as the other soldiers filed in, Marines, as Fedorov had told him. They were tall, and fierce looking men, well-muscled, well-armed, and their every movement and step betrayed the deadly craft they specialized in. They were men of war.

The burly Sergeant went first, all business now. The Corporal was next in line, then the others filed into the dark well of that lower alcove, and he could hear their footsteps begin to ascend. Fedorov herded Orlov along next.

"After you," said Orlov, fumbling with something in his pocket.

"Not on your life," said Fedorov. "There, take hold of Private Gomel's right shoulder. Good." He reached up and placed his hand on Orlov's broad shoulder in turn, and the line began to pull him into that shadowed alcove. At the last moment, he looked over for Mironov, and he smiled.

It was dark in that stairwell, and the walls and steps were dusty. That was something that would matter, though no one could foresee what would happen next. Fedorov's heart rate was up, for he himself did not know if this would even work. Every man that comes down those stairs seemed to be linked to the time and place where he originated. That was all he could cling to, but there was only one problem. None of them came here by that stairway. He had navigated the airship right over the hypocenter where that thing had fallen from the deeps of space, and it had pulled them here to 1908 like a ship

pulled down into a maelstrom of time.

So now he had no idea of what he should expect as they filed up those stairs, or where any of these men would end up. But he had one thing he held fast to, like he kept his hand firmly on Orlov's shoulder.

"*Sookin Sym!*" said Orlov. "Can't see a thing in here. Why didn't someone turn on a flashlight. And there are cobwebs everywhere!"

"Quiet!" Fedorov hushed him, and even as he did, he felt Orlov's big frame shudder with a sneeze.... And then he felt nothing at all, not the shoulder he had been clutching, not the steps beneath his feet—nothing!

Part V

Only Yesterday

“The timeless in you is aware of life's timelessness. And knows that yesterday is but today's memory and tomorrow is today's dream.”

— Kahil Gibran

Chapter 13

The sensation of emptiness surrounded him, like a man suddenly thrown into water, with no place to hold and no footing beneath him. Fedorov groped frantically ahead of him for Orlov, but he felt nothing. Then a swooning moment overcame him, and he felt as though he might lose consciousness. At last, the vaporous feeling that had taken him subsided. He could feel solidity in his arms and legs again, and light dispelled the darkness.

He literally stumbled, his feet on something solid once more, and then came tumbling through the upper landing of the stairway. There he blinked stupidly, his vision clearing to see Sergeant Troyak staring at him, and all the other Marines.

“Sir,” said Troyak. “Are you all right?”

Troyak had been the first to reach that upper floor, shouldering his way through a closed door to see a startled man with a rifle there. Secure the upper landing, those had been his orders. He quickly took care of the matter, moving faster than that man could believe, and putting him down for a long sleep.

One by one, the other Marines stumbled up through the doorway, some still with their hand on the shoulder of the man in front, though that was no longer necessary after they had passed the crucial mid-point on the stairway where an inexplicable rift in time existed, a crack in Fedorov’s mirror of history, and one that ran from 1908, to 1942, and then on to 2021.

At last Fedorov came up, bleary eyed, confused, but slowly regaining his senses. He had felt that strange sensation before when he walked those stairs, but it was much worse this time. Still, Time had delivered him to this place, along with all his team, save one. He looked around the room, Troyak still watching him closely, a concerned expression on his face.

“Orlov,” he said. “Where is Orlov?”

“He was right behind me,” said Private Gomel.

“And right in front of me,” said Fedorov. “Sergeant. Did he come up?”

“No sir, I thought he was behind you.”

Eyes wide, Fedorov turned to the doorway looking down the stairs, but there was no one there. The dusty steps descended into shadows.

“Orlov!” he called. “Chief? Are you down there?”

“Sir,” said Troyak. “You know Orlov. He’s probably still in the foyer, flirting with that maid.”

“I tell you he was right in front of me!” Fedorov had a frantic look on his face, then he stopped. “Until he sneezed.... Did you hear that, Private Gomel?”

“Aye sir, that big nose of his must have gotten a whiff of that dust. Don’t they ever clean this place?”

My god, thought Fedorov, realizing what must have happened. Lord no, this can’t be happening now. Yes, he sneezed, and what if he reflexively moved his hand to his face, the hand he had on Gomel’s shoulder. He was carrying a duffel bag in the other hand. That had to be what happened.

It was.

At that crucial moment, just as Orlov reached that fissure in time, he had sneezed, moved his hand as anyone might, and the human chain had been broken. Fedorov now knew that he had literally felt Orlov vanish, felt the man disappear. In that dizzying moment where he felt himself to be untethered from all reality, Orlov had slipped through that crack in the mirror, but obviously to another place and time.

But what about me, thought Fedorov? I was right there with him when he vanished. Why did time allow me to reach this place, but not Orlov? He knew this was a futile question. He would never really know the why of it, or for that matter, why this rift persisted here at all. Perhaps it was some ineffable gravity that saw him carry on through to this place, and another riptide of destiny that took Orlov elsewhere. Lord, not again, he thought. Now how will I find that man?

Before he could think anything further, there was the sound of footsteps coming up the main stairway. Acting on instinct and reflex, Troyak gave a hand signal to his Marines, and they moved quickly into rooms on either side of that landing, weapons at the ready. Fedorov was still standing and staring down those stairs, trying to decide whether he should go back and see if Orlov might still be there, perhaps experiencing that same moment of chaos; perhaps retreating to the lower level, still in 1908.

Now it was Troyak’s hand heavy on his shoulder that snapped him back to the present. “Sir!” he hissed in a low whisper. “Someone is coming!”

He got Fedorov to move, out of the landing to that stairway, and into an

adjacent room. Zykov had pulled the body of the fallen sentry inside just in time, for a group of soldiers in black uniforms came cautiously around the corner at the far end of the hall.

“What is going on up here,” came a voice. “Skolov? Where are you?”

Then silence, but to Troyak’s well trained ear, he knew those men were now slowly advancing down that hallway, weapons at the ready.

“Sir,” he whispered to Fedorov. “These are most likely the security men you briefed us about. What do you want done here?”

Fedorov had to think quickly, still shaken by all that had happened to him. He had gone from the tension of that moment with Mironov, the desperation and torment he felt, knowing he could not kill this man, and that everything else was his own damn fault. End it, a voice had whispered to him from deep within. Make certain you can never do any further harm.

That was when he had raised his trembling hand, intending to use that pistol and do just that—end it, end it all right then and there. It had been Mironov that stayed his hand, young Sergei Kirov, and that changed everything.

From that moment to this one was only a matter of fifteen minutes, but long years had intervened. Then came the shock of losing Orlov, and now this. If they had reached the 1940s again, then these men were most likely Tyrenkov’s elite security team, charged with the 24 hour watch on the railway inn. Fedorov realized that they were perhaps seconds from a real crisis here that would erupt in a firefight.

Think!

In a brief few seconds he sorted it all through. If his assumption was correct, then a firefight would soon leave men dead on both sides, and if his team prevailed here, it would only be a short interval before this building was completely surrounded by Tyrenkov’s men. There was too much he did not know. They had not even ascertained whether they had reached the 1940s yet. He simply could not allow more bloodshed at this juncture, and made a snap decision.

“I will handle this,” he said. “You men, stand fast. Take no action unless you hear a direct order from me.” Then he turned toward the half opened door and spoke in a loud voice. “Coming out!” he called. “Do not shoot! I am here to speak with your commanding officer!”

Fedorov stepped out of the room and into the hall, as Troyak grimaced,

his hand tighter on the assault rifle he held. They had come all this way, first in the helo, and then in that odd airship, which then encountered that terrible devastation. Fedorov had tried to explain it to him: “We’ve moved,” he had said. “We aren’t in the same time as before. That event out there is the Tunguska Event. That’s what we were overflying, only not in 1942. It isn’t 1942 any longer.... So if I’m right, then this is 1908, and just a day or so after that thing fell back there on the 30th of June.”

1908? The Sergeant had a rough time swallowing that, though Orlov seemed to get it down easily enough. Then Fedorov had told him this long incredible tale, about Orlov jumping ship, and a long mission to find him. The longer he spoke, the more Troyak came to feel that everything Fedorov was saying was true. It was almost as if he could remember it, though the images remained just beyond his grasp. But like that deep sound that you could not hear, but feel, Troyak knew it to be true—he could just feel it in his bones.

Then Fedorov had told him about the stairway, and what they were now going to attempt. Apparently it had worked! They were obviously not in the same place they were before. After he put down that single guard at the upper landing, Troyak caught a glimpse of the town through the window where a small table rested in a nook, with a few books. It was not the same town they had been in moments before.

So Troyak knew who the men were coming down that hall, and he was prepared to do what was necessary, for as long as it was necessary, until he and his men either ran out of ammunition, or were all dead. But Fedorov had other ideas. The fact that Orlov was now missing had shaken him, and he still did not really know what had happened down there with that young man he was speaking to in the dining room—Mironov.

Now the moment of crisis was at hand. Fedorov stepped out into the lighted hallway. Damn brave, thought Troyak. But how will he get us out of this mess now?

“You there!” came a hard voice. “Don’t move. Let me see your hands!”

“Don’t shoot, Lieutenant. Are you one of Tyrenkov’s men?”

“I’ll ask the questions. Where is my guard? Is there anyone else with you up here? Goddammit, speak, before I put a bullet through you!”

Fedorov recognized the man’s uniform, just like the men Karpov had brought onto the ship. So they had made it back to that same world, he

thought, though he did not yet know the year and day.

“Lieutenant, I would not do that if I were you. Tyrenkov would boil you alive. I am Anton Fedorov, *Starpom* off the battlecruiser *Kirov*, and I was sent here on a special mission by Vladimir Karpov, on his direct orders. Are you familiar with that name?”

“Karpov?” That name had obviously put the fear of the lord into the man, and Fedorov could see it in his manner. “You were sent here by Karpov? Who did you say you are?”

“Anton Fedorov. Now I will need to speak directly with your commanding officer, and quickly. You must find him at once.”

“Oh you’ll speak with him soon alright, but you may not like it. You’re the man we were told to be on the lookout for. How in God’s name did you get through my security?”

There came the sharp sound of fingers snapping, and the Lieutenant and Fedorov looked to see a tall man in a jet black overcoat at the far end of the hallway.

It was Tyrenkov.

“So here you are, Fedorov,” he said. “Quite a little hat trick you’ve pulled.” The Lieutenant immediately came to attention, saluting when he saw Tyrenkov, who had a drawn pistol in his black gloved hand.

“Yes, and you’re probably wondering just what the Lieutenant here was saying—how could I have possibly gotten through your security net. Well, let us sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it. I suppose Karpov will want to know as well, and I will report to him in good time.”

“Precisely,” said Tyrenkov. “Step this way, please, and if you don’t mind, I must have the Lieutenant search you.”

“If you must,” said Fedorov. “And you should know that I have a squad of Marines with me.”

“Indeed,” said Tyrenkov.

“And they are carrying things... How should I put this? They are carrying things that I do not think Karpov would want anyone to see, let alone handle in any way. If you will take my word on it, I will vouch for these men, and absolutely guarantee they will pose no threat to you, your men, or these premises.”

“I would certainly hope not, because we have a full Siberian rifle division posted here, and another at Kansk. Let me see then.... Alright Fedorov, I’m

going to take your word on this. Bring your men out. They can't stay here, of course, but I can have the Lieutenant here arrange an escort to quarters on this very block, and they can wait there until we sort all this business out."

"Agreed," said Fedorov. "Do you wish to have your man search me now, or shall I bring out my men? I did have a service pistol, but my Sergeant is carrying it now."

"Never mind, Fedorov. We can forego the formalities here. Something tells me that if you came here to do anything, it has already happened. So bring your men out, and let's get moving."

Fedorov gave orders to Troyak, stating that he wanted them followed to the letter, without exception, and any man causing the least bit of trouble would be stewed. He wanted the Sergeant to take the squad to the quarters arranged and wait there for his return. They were not to interact with the locals, nor were they to openly display or handle their weapons. Each man was permitted a sidearm and his knife, but all their rifles and other equipment should be stowed in the duffel bags, and no one was to touch it, except by Fedorov's direct order, or an order given by Troyak on Fedorov's approval. They would remain in contact hourly through their service jacket comm-link, and there was to be no trouble. If guards were posted outside their quarters, they were to be ignored and left alone.

"Good enough?" said Fedorov, looking at Tyrenkov.

"Good enough. I'll have food sent over for your men, and they will be considered our guests, unless I hear otherwise from Karpov. By the way..." Tyrenkov leaned in closer, lowering his voice so only Fedorov could hear. "Which one did you need to speak to?" He smiled.

They were led out, and Tyrenkov and Fedorov crossed the street to a building that had once been a school. He remembered it from the raid they had conducted here, right in the middle of one of Volkov's attacks. Soon they were seated in a room that had been comfortably appointed with chairs, a coffee table, and a bar. Tyrenkov sat down, slowly removing his gloves, and had an adjutant bring in a plate of cold cuts, cheese, nuts, and two glasses. He poured them a nice vodka.

"I'm famished," said Fedorov. "Thank you for your hospitality, and for treating me this way, though you may have every reason to do otherwise."

"That gets tedious, unless I know a man is clearly my enemy," said Tyrenkov. "Then I can be as heartless and cruel as any brute, though we

usually have Grilikov to look after that business. Are you my enemy, Mister Fedorov? Are you Karpov's enemy now, as he might think after this little theater you've pulled?"

"What theater? Let me explain what happened. As you may know, I was ordered here by Karpov."

"Yes, and ordered back to his ship as well."

"We got that message, and I confirmed, but we then had difficulties with the helicopter."

"We found it, of course," said Tyrenkov. "Right where you left it. But it seems we are missing an airship now." He folded his hands, waiting, watching Fedorov closely.

"I suppose I should tell you the entire story," said Fedorov.

Chapter 14

“So you elected to carry on with your mission, in spite of the recall order you received, and even after Karpov took a shot at you with one of those missiles?”

“I did. I am not just anyone, Tyrenkov. I am Captain of that ship, given that post by our Admiral Volsky himself. You may have hoodwinked us in Murmansk, and yes, Karpov had his way there, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten who I am, and what authority I have. I agreed to cooperate with Karpov, until he fired that missile. Let’s just say that if you had used that pistol in your hand when you first appeared a moment ago, we might not be sitting here for this nice little conversation. The moment Karpov refused to treat me like the man I am, was the moment he forfeited his authority over me. I did what any sane man would have done at that moment—I saved that helo, my men, and my mission.”

“Laudable, but I don’t think Karpov will see things quite that way, neither one of them. Big Brother is quite upset with what he now perceives as your deliberate insubordination, and he’s been riding Little Brother to find you, not to mention his airship.”

“That won’t be found again. I had to destroy it, along with everyone aboard, and I’ll take full responsibility for that.”

“I see... Quite ballsy of you, Fedorov. Little Brother won’t like that one bit. He’s taken to his fleet like a fish to water, just like the first one did. Volkov still outnumbers us in that area, and now the Germans are getting into the act, and with ships carrying some very dangerous armament. It could upset the entire balance of power in terms of air superiority. So then, you had your men fry that airship. But what of the mission?”

“As you can see, I got through to the target, though not in any way I expected. To be quite honest with you, after Karpov took that shot at my helo, all bets were off. I elected to try and get to neutral ground, and plotted a course for Soviet territory. As it happened, that course took me over some very dangerous ground.”

He told Tyrenkov what had happened to them over the Stony Tunguska, and where they ended up. With each passing moment, he could see

Tyrenkov's detached manner melt away, and he leaned closer.

"You got all the way back to 1908?" he said, his voice lowered.

"July 1st, to be precise," said Fedorov, "which was exactly where I hoped to go by first coming here in this time—here to that railway inn. I assume you know all about it. Well, I've been down those stairs before, and it was my assertion that a connection exists there between this time and 1908."

"Karpov has told me all about this," said Tyrenkov. "And he's also told me what you were attempting to do there, and why it was so imperative that your mission be stopped, by any and every means at our disposal. We've been looking for you ever since, but I never thought I would find you right there as I did, like a bear with his paw in the honey pot." He paused, looking around, then focusing on Fedorov again.

"Everything here looks the same," he said, "even that painting over there of the Flying Dutchman that I'm fond of. I had it hung there myself six months ago. So may I assume your assassination attempt failed?"

Now it was time to introduce a little whitewash to the picture he was painting, thought Fedorov. "Assassination attempt? You mean Sergei Kirov? I had direct orders from Karpov to abort that mission. I wanted to know why, and got a missile instead. Then one thing led to another, as I have told you. However, when I did find that fate had brought me to the precise place I intended to go, I had... second thoughts. Karpov had to have a reason for aborting the mission, even if he would not take the time to trust me with it, or trust I would comply. That was his mistake. For my part, while I had every intention of finding Mironov and ending this nightmare, I relented."

That sounded a good deal better than the truth, thought Fedorov. I was alone with Mironov, and no other living soul knows what happened there. So that reality is how I frame it now. Tyrenkov doesn't need to know that I was too weak to go through with my mission; that I was ready to end my own life rather than face up to the consequences of my actions here. He doesn't have to know what really happened, and that I will now probably bear a scar on my chin, just like the one on Karpov's cheek. No one ever needs to know how that happened, or why.

"You relented..." said Tyrenkov, studying him closely.

"Call it a change of heart, or you can also think that I was just being a loyal servant of the man you serve as well. In any case, Sergei Kirov lived. I hope I'm correct in that. Frankly, I have no way of knowing what we may

have inadvertently changed this time. Every step we took there was perilous to every hour and day that followed. Did he live?”

“Kirov? He certainly did. Everything is as it was before you boarded your helicopter. At least it seems that way, but how would I know that for sure?”

Fedorov’s face showed obvious relief, but knew that it might be impossible for Tyrenkov to detect anything that may have changed.

“And Stalin?”

“Who is that?” Tyrenkov smiled. “No, I’m afraid he died as a very young man, and well before he got down to business with Sergo, Mikoyan, Beria and all the rest. Yes, Karpov has told me all about him. But I am curious. From what I have learned, Volkov also used that stairway to get to 1908. Are you saying that I could do that, this moment, and end up there myself, just by walking down those stairs?”

“That would be a very dangerous thing to do,” said Fedorov.

“Yes, I suppose it would. But would it happen, Fedorov?”

“Possibly. Every man gets somewhere, to some time other than the one he leaves behind him. Where you might end up is anyone’s guess, but it could be no earlier than the 30th of June, 1908.”

“Because you believe the event you witnessed from the *Irkutsk*—at Tunguska—was the root cause of that fissure in time?”

“Exactly. So you see, that stairway represents power of a kind that no man on this earth has ever had at his disposal. The first time I went down those stairs it was an accident, and I caused a good deal of harm, which I don’t think I can ever really atone for. I thought my mission might change that—we both did, Karpov and I. He changed his mind, called off the mission, but did so in a rather disrespectful and boorish way. I carried on, with a little help from chance and fate, but I changed my mind as well. So, Tyrenkov, you will have to answer your own question now. Am I your enemy? And what might you have done differently in my place?”

Tyrenkov merely smiled, thinking.

“I might suggest you make your report to Big Brother on all of this. Little Brother is a good deal more irascible these days.”

“I understand.”

“*Abakan* is tethered to the number two docking tower outside. It’s a fairly fast ship. I’m prepared to put you and your men on it tonight, and you can leave under cover of darkness. Little Brother has been informed that we have

you in custody. He's well to the north on *Tunguska*, pulling in his long range patrols now. I can tell you exactly where every ship in the fleet is at this moment. So listen here, Anton Fedorov, once Captain and now *Starpom* of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. I can put you and your men on *Abakan*, and you can go wherever you wish."

"Wherever I wish?"

"Oh, I'll have to say that I ordered *Abakan* to fly you directly to the Sea of Okhotsk. That's where your ship still is. Yet you have already hijacked one airship, so I suppose you could do the same with this one given the things your Marines might be packing in those duffel bags. So then, if daring do is still on your mind, be my guest. Continue your journey to Soviet territory if you wish. Go find Sergei Kirov and make your mind known to him. Of course, he might just send you right back to Karpov. You see, he's somewhat indebted to us. If Karpov were to ask, he would likely get you extradited in a heartbeat, just like he got his ship back. And of course, I'll have to deny I ever said any of this. If you do take that course, I'll have a good bit of trouble on my hands. I might even lose my job."

"Rest easy," said Fedorov. "What you offer is very tempting, but I've only just spoken with Sergei Kirov—not two hours ago, or thirty-four years ago from your perspective. We've had our little chat for the time being, so no, I think I'll go right back to my ship and see the Admiral himself. He deserves an explanation, and to know what I've told you here direct from me. Then again, I won't be too happy if he elects to put a missile into *Abakan* the minute we get within range."

"I suppose that is a risk you'll have to take. I've taken one here by not locking you up and turning you over to Little Brother and his louts. Yes, he has his own security men now. It was inevitable, I suppose, but my people keep a close eye on things."

"Considering that," said Fedorov, "I have a little problem, and it could become a very big one soon. There was one other man with us, Chief Orlov off the ship. I insisted he come with me on that mission, because let's just say he's someone *I* need to keep an eye on. Well, something happened as we came up the stairs. He was right in front of me. In fact, I had my hand on his shoulder—until he disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"Vanished, from right under my palm." Fedorov held up his right hand.

“He didn’t make it to this time, and I think it is because he lost physical contact with the man in front of him, and.... Ended up somewhere else.”

“You say he was right in front of you?”

“Yes. I was the last man in the line as we came up.”

“Then how is it you made it here—to this precise time? If he lost contact, wouldn’t that affect you as well?”

“I thought as much, but it seems Time wanted me here. That’s the only way I can explain it. Yet Orlov is gone—missing—and I have absolutely no idea what may have happened to him.”

“Might he have stayed right there in 1908?”

“I certainly hope not. I was trying to ascertain that when your Lieutenant came along. From what I could see, he was not on the stairs, and he didn’t get by me. At least I don’t think he did.”

“Then where did he go?”

“Using the tortured logic I’ve come to embrace concerning all of this movement in time,” said Fedorov, “he could not appear in any time where he already existed.”

“Karpov did.”

“Yes, but those were very strange circumstances.”

“Events on that stairway could hardly be described otherwise,” said Tyrenkov.

“True, but this particular fissure through time has been very consistent. The connection it makes to 1908 has persisted over decades. Orlov was going *up* the stairs, and any movement in that direction has always produced a movement forward in time. Who knows where he may end up, but I think it will have to be a time after the arrival of our ship, and after the time we vanished over the hypocenter of Tunguska. I could be wrong. I suppose he could have appeared prior to the 30th of June, 1940 as well, and I intend to look into that. Orlov has a way of blundering about—a bit of a bull in a china closet. If he did appear before that hour and day, then I might find out about it in the history. Your intelligence network would be very useful.”

“My network is at your service,” said Tyrenkov. “In fact, once Big Brother hears about this, I know what my orders will be already.”

“Find Orlov,” said Fedorov. “That’s been my own little bailiwick in all of this business. The last time he went missing—well let’s just say that a good many dominoes fell after that. He’s dangerous, what I might call a free

radical in time. He changes things, not willfully, but unknowingly, and the effect he might have on events occurring after he appears is impossible to calculate, though I fear it would be profound.”

“I understand,” said Tyrenkov. “Yes, quite a nice little problem. I’ll put my men on this at once.”

Fedorov smiled. “Mister Tyrenkov,” he said quietly. “It seems that you are not just anyone either. I think we have come to an understanding here, but let me say one thing more. I’ll take your offer for a ride on the *Abakan*, and I’ve decided we’ll be going back to *Kirov*—the ship, not the man—because there’s a war on here, and I’ve decided it has to be won.”

Tyrenkov nodded. “I understand,” he said. “Big Brother will be happy to have you on board, Fedorov. He may bellow and berate you for a while, but he’ll soon see what was apparent to me from the moment I first saw you on that upper landing this evening. Yes, you are not just anybody when it comes to all of this. You have business to attend to here, and I hope you can manage it. Karpov needs you. This world needs you as well, so don’t forget that.”

“I’ll try to remember, and believe it,” said Fedorov, reaching for another piece of cheese. “Is there any more vodka?”

Chapter 15

The hand that had saved the life of Anton Fedorov would be the hand that would change all history from that moment forward. Mironov stood there, confused and still afraid when he saw those rough soldiers come back into the room. They lined up, one after another, each man with a hand on the shoulder of the one in front of him.

Up they went, and Mironov watched them go, listening to their hard boots on the creaky steps. He could not grasp why these men wanted to get up to the second floor, and why they would have to be so careful about it like this. Fedorov seemed intent on making sure that they left nothing behind, no sign of their presence. Perhaps he needed to go up to that room they were in before and fetch something, but why take the whole lot of them for that? He did not understand, but he would, and very soon.

He waited there, until the sound of those heavy boots stilled and was gone. That alone seemed odd to him, for he should be hearing them clomping about on the second floor, but all was silent. He walked slowly towards the alcove, that same curiosity tugging at him. There he listened in the hushed silence for some time, but resisted the urge to go any further. This time he would take that strange man's advice, and also take no further chances that another of those hard Marines would bother him.

He walked briskly towards the front entrance, seeing that the proprietor had just returned. Almost everyone in the town had been off in a clearing beyond the rail yard to the west. There they had gathered to send off the German race team, all the tourists, the reporter Thomas Byrne and his translator, and all the locals as well. Mironov wanted no part of that. All he wanted to do now was get on that train when it arrived later that day, and get as far from this place as possible. As he slipped out the door, he cast a glance at the proprietor, who was watching him with a strange look in his eye. The poor man was probably wondering if they would arrest him too, thought Mironov, and he was out on Shkolnaya Street, thinking what to do next.

He briefly considered hiking back to Staynyy, but discarded that. There could be other soldiers about near the wreckage of that great airship. Boarding there, he would be easily noticed by any other operatives of the

secret police who might be on that train. So instead he just went off to a restaurant, needing some good food, and just a little time to think about all that had happened to him just now. He took a window seat, and one with a view of the inn, and sat there for some time, fully expecting to see all those soldiers, and Fedorov, emerge and tramp off to some unknown destination, but they never came. They never left that inn.

That alone was a powerful mystery that begged to be solved. Men do not simply disappear into thin air. Where could they have gone? They were probably waiting for the train, he thought. I will most likely see them all again there, and I can only hope this Fedorov doesn't have a change of heart. Who knows what he might do? He might get worried of reprisals from his superiors, and think twice about sending me on my way. He had that gun in his hand when we spoke for a reason, but somehow, he couldn't bring himself to do what he was ordered. Beneath that uniform, there is a good man, and with a good soul. I must take some solace in that.

Well then, the goddamned train is my only way out of here now. I certainly can't hitch a ride with the German race team. I've got to go east, and Train 94 is the last ride that way for another week. So I'll have to get on here, along with all the other passengers, and take my chances.

The German race team started on its way to a chorus of loud cheers, the drivers waving to the crowd as they fired up the engine and started off. The people waved and hooted for a time, then milled about, and the locals started to disperse back to their homes and businesses. Mironov watched them from a distance, thinking to spy out anyone else who looked suspicious. There was one other man with a uniform and jacket very much like Fedorov's that he might have seen a few hours earlier, but Ivan Volkov had taken one of the carriages heading west to Kansk. It had all been that close.

Volkov had never been to Ilanskiy, but he was already shaken by what he had seen of the place. It was clearly not the same train station he had come to earlier, and the madness that fell on him would redouble when he reached Kansk, a town he knew quite well. Nothing there was as it should have been. Most of the city was gone, as was the big arsenal north of the river that would make this place a target if the war was underway. The biochemical plant was missing, all the buildings and houses seemed antiquated.

He would head south, wandering like a zombie, thinking to reach the Kansk Airbase where he might catch a plane out of this place. There was no

airbase, but also no sign of any attack that might have destroyed it. What was happening? How could any of this be possible? With each passing hour, those questions would multiply, the madness blooming with them, and it would be months before Ivan Volkov fully accepted what had happened to him, and realized just where he was, or rather *when*.

So as Mironov headed east to Irkutsk, Volkov headed west, and the two men would never get close enough to meet again, except on the field of battle. Mironov spent time in Irkutsk, eventually contacting his comrade Popov, and then deciding to go to the Caucasus. It was on that journey west again that he stopped at Ilanskiy, throwing caution to the wind. Venturing up the back stairway, he saw the world that would come in the years ahead, and determined what he could do to prevent that terrible vision from ever arising in his homeland.

Now Fedorov's warning finally made sense, and he determined what he must do—what Fedorov could not bring himself to do, and made that fateful visit to Baku, killing Josef Stalin before he ever had a chance to fatten himself as the dark spider in the center of the Bolshevik web that was now being spun throughout the land.

Mironov would stay in the Caucasus for some time, and end up a journalist and editor for the newspaper *Terek*, secretly taking on the code name he would be known by ever after—the very same name that strange man Fedorov had called him—Kirov. He was eventually arrested again on the same old charges surrounding the existence of that illegal printing press. He was in and out of prison, and then the revolution came, and the civil war soon after.

Active in the founding of the Terek Republic, Kirov was at first a subordinate to another strong man with an impossible name, Commissar Grigory Konstantinovich Ordzhonikidze. Most simply called him Sergo. With him, and another man named Mikoyan, Kirov was part of the Bolshevik resistance, securing supplies, uniforms, and weapons from Moscow, and floating them down the Volga on barges to Astrakhan. There was no other way to get them there, for the leader of the White movement, Denikin, had seized control of all the rail lines that led that way.

It was there, in the Caucasus, that Sergei Kirov cut his teeth in the business of war. He teamed up with Sergo and Mikoyan, battled Denikin's forces, and even those of Kolchak emerging from Siberia. The struggle in

that region contributed much to his stubbornness later, refusing to abandon his holdings in the Kuban, and tenaciously ordering the defense of old Tsaritsyn on the Volga, the city that would now never come to be called 'Stalingrad.' There, and at the other stronghold of the region, Astrakhan, Kirov fought the White Army with the 11th and 12th Red Armies.

Then came an event unlooked for in the history, when a man named Volkov secretly plotted the demise of Denikin, and seized control of the White movement. The chaos that caused allowed the Reds to consolidate their gains, and eventually drive the Whites from the Ukraine. They fled south, into the Caucasus, and east of the Volga into the provinces of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the region around the Caspian Basin. There the White movement, nearly extinguished, was revitalized by Ivan Volkov, eventually posing a threat strong enough to again begin driving north and east. They took Orenburg, making it the center of their government, and pushed on through Ufa to reach the Volga.

Kirov, now rising to the top of the Bolshevik movement, stopped them there, controlling Volgograd, and most of the Kuban region, where the lines of battle shifted back and forth with each new offensive mounted by either side. Volkov tried to take Volgograd three times, and cities like Saratov and Samara as well, but could only get the last. Kirov stubbornly held the White armies at bay, defending the line of the Volga, and made it a point to keep strong pressure on Volkov's armies in the Caucasus. It was not just for the oil there, but for the fact that the lower Caucasus, the Terek Region and Baku, were all places where young Sergei Kirov had begun his revolutionary career, and he wanted them back again.

Volkov took and held Astrakhan, but Kirov held Volgograd, and he would continue to hold it throughout the long, never-ending civil war with Volkov that kept Russia divided into the late 1930s. Then war came in 1939, and the Germans came shortly thereafter. Volkov was quick to see his opportunity, and allied himself with Nazi Germany, elated to see the Wehrmacht slowly consuming his long time enemy. Then, in late 1942, the White Armies finally linked up with the Germans on the lower Don, cutting off Kirov's forces in the Kuban, and threatening the city he had defended so tenaciously over the decades against Volkov—Volgograd.

Zhukov had pleaded with Kirov to get those armies out of the Caucasus, but he had refused. Zhukov had told him that Volgograd was useless from a

military standpoint now, and certainly from an economic one if the last rail line into the place were ever to be cut, but that did not matter. Kirov ordered the city held, and four Soviet armies were committed there to try and stop the whirlwind German advance under General Manstein and the SS Commander Felix Steiner. They delayed it a good long while, but in the end, those SS troops broke through. Eventually, only Shumilov's 66th and Chuikov's 62nd were still on the line to defend the city, and there was great danger that they might soon be cut off and face annihilation.

If they die, thought Kirov, then all those years of my struggle in the south die with them. Zhukov doesn't understand that, but there's more at stake there than brick and mortar. It's my roots there, the roots of the revolution itself, the symbol of the entire struggle I've fought with Volkov over the years. Volgograd must be held. We must not lose it. I won't hear Volkov clucking on Radio Orenburg that he's taken it. I won't!

Then he remembered that day in 1908, the day the red sky came in the northeast, and the sun rose twice. He remembered Ilanskiy, and everything Fedorov had said and done there. Only this time, there was an extra twist to those memories that had never been there before. This time he remembered that last conversation with Fedorov, the look in the man's eyes, the desperation and fear that seemed to be kindled there, and the despair. He remembered how he lunged, impulsively, to stay the other man's hand when he put that gun to his head, one good man at his core trying to save another.

He did save Fedorov, and in more ways than he could know just then. In saving him, he also saved a good deal more. Fedorov would live, with a scar on his chin to remind him of that moment. And Fedorov would take Tyrenkov's offer and board *Abakan* that night, with Troyak, and all his men—save one—Gennadi Orlov.

That was going to matter a great deal in the days ahead, for Orlov had been a stone in Fedorov's shoe for some time. With Tyrenkov's network to help him, Fedorov hoped he could quickly tie off that loose thread in the loom of these events, but Orlov was Orlov, and anything could happen when he was involved.

As for Troyak, he kept thinking and thinking about the things Fedorov had told him, and about that trek up the strange stairway that made truth of his assertions. They were back in 1942, or so it seemed, but Troyak was not quite the same man that began this mission. He was different. He was

thinking more now, and he was remembering, and so was someone else that night.

Berzin's own network would also pick up hints and bits of the strange doings at Ilanskiy. He came in to make his evening intelligence report to Sergei Kirov, scratching his bristly haired head.

"It looks like they found those men that went missing on Karpov's airship," he said, reporting the latest information he had from a man he infiltrated into Tyrenkov's security forces.

"Did they?" said Kirov, staring out on the city of Leningrad from his office chair, lost in the darkness, for no light would burn after dark.

"It's very strange," said Berzin. "They were apprehended right inside that damn railway inn at Ilanskiy, up on the second floor."

A light kindled in Kirov's eyes, and there was just the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "And the airship? The *Irkutsk*?"

"It still hasn't been found," said Berzin. "And damn if that isn't odd. How do you hide a thing that size? Where could it possibly be, seeing as though the men who made off with it have already been found? This Captain Symenko was once Orlov's man. Do you think he might have defected with that ship to Orenburg?"

"No," said Kirov. "No, I don't think so. Don't worry about the airship, Grishin. It is of no further concern."

"Karpov won't like that. He lost the *Angara* a few weeks back to a German airship."

"Did he? Then send him *Archangelsk*. It's just been sitting up there for months and months patrolling the Kara Sea. Winter is coming, and there won't be much for it to see or do. I'll want a letter delivered with it, for Karpov's eyes only."

"Very good sir. As you wish."

Sergei Kirov leaned back in his chair, rocking very slowly, and raised a small glass of vodka to his lips. He would make a direct request to the Siberians, asking that if Anton Fedorov were to be found, he should be treated with utmost leniency, and respect. Then he closed his eyes, and summoned up the memory of that day, so long ago it seemed now, when he had left the bench in the depot where he spent a cold uncomfortable night, and let his curiosity get the better of him. He could still see that airship burning as it fell from the sky, the *Irkutsk*, as he now reckoned it to be. It was

as clear in his mind as if it had happened only yesterday....

Part VI

Allies

“There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.”

— **Winston Churchill**

Chapter 16

Rommel had a taste for the clean salt spray of the sea. Turn now, he thought. You haven't the fuel to push on east, nor do you really want to go there. Yes, you told von Thoma that you had to demonstrate that option, but it cannot be done. Now is the time, and this is the place. Turn now.

He had executed a masterful plan, luring O'Connor out of the bottleneck at El Agheila, then making a rapid turning movement towards the 2nd British forward depot at Nofilia. That was the place he really needed, for it had the fuel that would allow him to keep up the fight. Unfortunately, the British got there first, and now he knew his game was over. They would never let him take that fuel without destroying it. So it was now or never. He had to beat the British here, or withdraw.

Seeing the trap he was in, O'Connor had nonetheless stopped his 50th Northumbrian Division at Wadi Hamar, knowing the Italians could not move them. Then his line bent parallel to the coast with the 4th Indian, the Free French Brigade and finally his 7th Armored, which barred the way to the vital depot. On its left, the powerful 23rd Armored Brigade was massing like a clenched mailed fist, and then the one division he had withdrawn east, his 51st Highlanders, spread out in a long defensive front, guarding the flank of Nofilia and blocking the route to the coast.

Yet by this time, Rommel had all three of his panzer divisions massed south of Nofilia, and a decision to make. His *Sonderverband 288* had spent a harrowing night further east on the extreme flank scouting the way in the event Rommel decided to persist with his envelopment. Several wadis cut their way to the coast near As Sidr where a road ran south into the desert. Wadi Rigel was the southernmost tributary, which then flowed into the dry sandy bed of Wadi Matratin near the coast. That road ran parallel to the wadis, and just a few kilometers to the west.

Perfect, thought László Almásy as he reached Hill 240, right astride the road. If Rommel turns here, that wadi will screen his flank. He can push right up this road to the coast and bag the whole 8th Army. But then what will he do with it? He would have one ornery cat in the bag, and I don't think the Afrika Korps has the strength to destroy it, or the supplies to lay siege to it.

As always, Rommel was counting on pilfering the enemy depots out here, and now he's bunched up near Nofilia. The British won't let that go easily.

He turned and found a motorcycle runner, ordering him back to report his findings to Rommel. "Tell him the way around this flank remains open, and there's a good road running to the coast." The man saluted, off in a cloud of dust to try and find the elusive Rommel. It was then that things began to get difficult. Almásy had turned to head for the best armored car he had with him that night, a nice long barreled 234, and had he been just a little quicker, he would have been killed. The vehicle suddenly exploded with a thunderous roar, the turret blown completely off. It was knocked on its side, every man within immolated, and what was left of it began to burn with hot, searing fire.

Almásy had been blown off his feet, his left arm nicked by shrapnel, though he was otherwise of sound body. Yet the suddenness of the attack stunned he and his men. "Leutnant!" He shouted. "Where did that come from? Can you see anything?"

"Nothing sir, the ground below is completely dark. There's no sign of enemy movement at all. It must have been artillery."

One hell of a lucky hit if that were the case, thought Almásy. He doubted that, for he could see no reason why artillery should find them where they were... Unless the British had taken the inland track f to Ar Rijel. He knew they had posted a reserve division at Mersa Brega. Perhaps it was heading this way, and this was one of those damnable little Kampfgruppen the British would sometimes build, out in front.

He was both right and wrong in his assessment. Almásy could read a map, like any good scout, and he had correctly fingered Ar Rijel in his mind as the only likely spot a battery of artillery might be set up. Yet how would the British have spotted him in the dark? The LRDG must be out here, he reasoned, and with each passing moment, he was getting closer to the truth.

Popski, Reeves, and a company of SAS commandos were out on that flank. They had fallen back to the wadis, their mission being to screen that area, and warn O'Connor of any significant enemy movement there. Popski radioed Reeves, telling him to keep an eye on Hill 210. "It's right on the road," he said. "If we get visitors, they'll likely crown it soon." And that was exactly what Almásy had done.

Reeves saw the heat signatures on infrared, his small company then in a perfect place for a nice ambush, about 2500 meters east of the hilltop. He got

on the radio to Sergeant Williams, who was riding in one of his two remaining Challengers.

“Willy, see that vehicle up on top of the hill.”

“Nice and clear,” said Williams.

“Good. Put the Charm on it.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Reeves was referring to the Charm 3 round fired by those heavy British tanks. It was the L27 APFSDS variant, which stood for Armor Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot. As Almásy had seen, it had a rather devastating punch, blowing clean through the target, exploding every ready round in the armored car’s turret as it did so.

Reeves smiled when he saw that fire burning on the hill, just a little payback for the loss of his number three Challenger. It still pained him that he had to put the tank down with demolition charges, and all because of a bloody landmine that had blown off the track and badly damaged a wheel. It was something the Brigade had ample resources to correct, and that tank would have been operation again in a few hours, but the Brigade was gone, and he still had no idea why.

That night he played a game of ghostly death against the German scouting patrols. He would fire, then move, and the ranges he could kill at were so far that the enemy could never really see them, let alone answer their fire. The Germans lost three of the Sturmgeschutz that had been assigned to Sonderverband 288, and they never saw what hit them.

With dawn still a few hours off, Almásy decided he had taken enough. He lost those three Sturms, two armored cars, and a supply truck. Whatever was out there, and he had an inkling as to what it was, he wanted no part of it. He gave the order for his team to withdraw back up the track towards Rommel’s presumed position, but would soon find that the British had cut him off.

As for Reeves, he soon got a message direct from O’Connor, and it was somewhat puzzling. He was ordered to withdraw immediately towards Mersa Brega, and to take any and every vehicle under his command, leaving nothing behind. Those he had lost were badly burned, and though the Challenger was sound in its main body, its innards had been wrecked by those charges.

“Withdraw to Mersa Brega immediately and await further orders,” he said to Sergeant Williams. “Maybe O’Connor is getting the jitters and thinking to pull out.”

“He wants his 300 Spartans back at Thermopylae,” said Williams, and it was a very apt metaphor. In fact, it was the news that had shaken both Wavell and O’Connor that was behind that order, and it had come from even higher up, from Churchill himself. Those few remaining tanks, and the brave men in them, all as yet unborn, were now deemed to be more precious to Great Britain than the Crown Jewels. The order came down that Reeves was to proceed immediately to Agedabia, where he would be met by a special British receiving force bearing additional fuel. He was to replenish, and then proceed across the wide desert base of Cyrenaica, to a point southeast of Tobruk near the railhead.

“Looks like we’re being called back to Brigade,” said Reeves, not knowing that the Brigade no longer existed, at least not here. As they withdrew there came the welcome sight of a British armored cars, then a column of lorried infantry. It was actually the 1st South African Division, arriving at last from Mersa Brega. There had always been a standing order to keep his Challengers out of sight as much as possible, so Reeves found a glen for them, and sent the two tanks there. He briefed the brigade commander, directed him to Popski up ahead, and then waited a few hours while the column passed. Then he was on his way again, down the long desert track leading east.

Damn if I wasn’t looking forward to kicking Rommel’s ass into Tunisia,” he said to his gunner, Corporal Holmes, now provisionally promoted to Gunnery Sergeant Holmes by Reeves himself. “Gunny, you did well on that big 90 yesterday.”

“Sixteen kills, sir.”

“And once we get back with the rest of Brigadier Kinlan’s boys, you’ll likely log a good deal more. But why the bloody hell don’t they come this way? It’s a 350 mile ride from here to Tobruk.”

“Still can’t raise anyone in Brigade,” said Holmes.

“Oh well,” said Reeves. “Orders are orders. Off we go then, and at least it will be an air conditioned ride. I’ll have plenty of time to figure what I’ll have to say to Kinlan about losing number three. He may not be too happy about the fact that I made off with that Challenger platoon in the first place.”

“What’s done is done, Lieutenant,” said Holmes. “But I’m of the same mind as you on this. Radio silence under these circumstances is bad enough, and I can’t see why Brigade is hanging back like this. We would have blasted

Rommel to hell back there.”

“Now it’s back to Tobruk,” said Reeves with a shrug.

In fact, his journey was going to take him quite a bit farther than that. For far to the west, harbored in the Azores and safely away from curious eyes, the modern day replenishment fleet the British had come to call “the Funnies” also received some cryptic orders. They were to proceed around the Cape to Alexandria at once. Sixteen hours out to sea, their escort arrived, a pair of British cruisers, a pack of destroyers and one ship they at least felt familiar with, its lines unmistakable in spite of the extensive refit. It was the *Argos Fire*.

The mission of this little group was to get to Alexandria, and load Reeves and all his equipment on those fast Roll On / Roll off ships. The vehicles were to be distributed to as many ships as possible, and the two Challengers were to be assigned to separate vessels. The Convoy Master shook his head, not understanding the orders at first, for they had no word about anything that had happened. Churchill was taking no chances that he might lose that remaining equipment to an enemy U-Boat attack, which was one more reason the *Argos Fire* was sent along. That ship was the best escort ship in the Royal Navy now with her Sampson Radar sets, excellent sonar, and an air defense that was all but impervious.

It would be a very long journey, but they were all going home to the old corporate port where Elena Fairchild had once set up its company operations, at Port Erin on the Isle of Man, where the Triskelion symbol of three legs ruled the land, along with the old saying that “no matter where you throw me, I stand.” Soon there would be more going on there than the men smoking kippers. It was a nice little isolated place, with a small island off the southern tip known as the “Calf of Man,” largely uninhabited, except for a few lighthouses and the sea birds. It would soon have some very strange visitors.

* * *

Rommel had decided. He received Almásy’s message, thinking about it for some time. His problem now was fuel, and the place Almásy was describing to him was another 30 kilometers east. He could take his tigers east if he wished, but as he did so, he would leave that 30 kilometer flank open to his north. If O’Connor called his bluff and stood his present ground,

all he had to do was drive south from his defensive positions at Nofilia, and then it would be Rommel cut off, low on fuel, and with a 30 kilometer withdrawal just to get back to the fight, the fuel in his tanks that much lower.

No, he thought. They are here, the fight is right in front of me, so I turn now, this very minute. “Bayerlein! Get the word out to all panzer commanders. We turn north here!”

The Panzers turned, and there was a mighty collision with the 51st Highland Division in the center. Had it been alone, those three panzer Divisions would have punched right through to the coast. But on its right was the whole of the 23rd Armored Brigade, and on its left was the 2nd Armored Brigade and all the 1st Armored Division troops. Behind it, at Nofilia itself, O’Connor’s 7th Armored Brigade stood on defense with its infantry elements, but many of the tank battalions were still in reserve.

Most of the 15th Panzer was caught up in a battle with Briggs and his 1st Division. When 7th Panzer threatened to punch a hole to their right, the timely arrival of the 7th Motor Brigade was able to plug the gap and hold the line, the British infantry stoically defending the ground. O’Connor sent up everything he had, even the Army AA battalions, with their 40mm Bofors on portee trucks. They leveled those guns and chewed up the desert against any advance by the Panzergrenadiers. In places, the line of the Highland Division buckled, particularly when the heavy German tanks of the 501st Schwerepanzer Battalion came in, Hitler’s special gift to Rommel.

An hour into the battle Rommel had pushed the British back several kilometers, but many of his tank companies had been forced to halt, virtually out of ammunition. He sent those that had replenished forward to continue pressing the attack, but the British Army was like an onion at this point, with layer after layer of troops in the rear echelons. There were lines of AT guns, AA Guns, then the Royal Engineers. After that came the armored cars of the 7th Armored Division, held in reserve behind Nofilia. Behind them were the 6th Raja Rifles and 8th Gurkha battalions, both 8th Army reserve troops that had been among the first to arrive here. The Panzers kept coming, but there always seemed to be another layer to the defense yet unfought.

The charge of the 501st heavy battalion was like the Old Guard being sent in at Waterloo. Then the word came that Rommel had feared, and he knew his time here had run out. Almásy was on the radio, still dueling with British armored cars on the flank, and now reporting that the 1st South African

Infantry Division was arriving like the Prussians on the right flank.

At that moment, Rommel was still 15 kilometers from the coast road, his tank companies depleted, fuel becoming an issue, and with an unbroken enemy still fighting doggedly in front of him. It wasn't Kinlan and his unstoppable heavy tanks that would put an end to his attack that day, it was simple common sense, something that he had embraced after his many defeats. The old Rommel might have persisted, and to no real successful end there. The new Rommel knew that it was time to be gone.

We've hurt them, he thought. I stopped their advance, pushed them back, and showed them I can still box their ears if I decide to. Now, however, we need to get west. With a twinge of reluctance, he gave the order for all units to break off the attack and withdraw towards the depot stores at Al Hunjah. The artillery was to lay down a covering barrage, and then pack up and head west immediately.

As the Germans disengaged, fighting small firefights to do so, O'Connor was trying to ascertain what was happening. There was a lot of confusion on the battlefield, which stretched some ten kilometers wide at the point of the main attack. Smoke from guns and burning vehicles mixed with the dust kicked up by all the maneuvering to throw a complete pall over the landscape, and beneath it, Rommel was moving from one unit to the next in a fast Kubelwagon, pointing out the direction he wanted his columns to go.

The disengagement was slow, but the British had been beaten up enough that they held back, thinking to take the time to reorganize their own lines and bring up water and fresh ammo from the depot at Nofilia. That had been the footrace Rommel lost when he first came this way, and the dance that men like Popski, Reeves, and those SAS Commandos played on that flank was instrumental in allowing O'Connor to get to his supply point before the Germans. Added to that, O'Connor's own understanding of what Rommel was doing enabled him to know exactly where he was going to need to make his stand. He had wisely stopped to stand his ground and fight, and while chastened and bruised, he had the final satisfaction of knowing that Rommel could not move him further.

"If he had pushed through to the coast," he would later explain to Wavell, "then I would have dug in and dared him to do anything more about it. We had enough at Nofilia to last three more days, and I would have thrown everything I had at him to break out if necessary. He may think he's beaten

me. Well, he certainly stopped me, at least for a time, but here I stand, and there he goes. That's all that matters."

Chapter 17

Hundreds of miles to the west, another restless General was chafing at the bit, George Patton. He had set out to flank the German defense of Algiers, but the Germans brought up their 10th Panzer Division, counterattacked, and stopped him at M'Sila. They had even taken the place, which angered him to no end. He knew that if he had his whole corps up and ready, he could push them out, which is why he went looking for Terry Allen of the 1st Division, the last to arrive on the scene.

With the Big Red 1 finally up, Patton ordered an immediate counterattack to retake M'Sila, and by the 11th of October, he had a battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment supported by tanks and more infantry from the 1st Armored in that town. As he surveyed the scene, he could clearly see that the Germans were trying to disengage.

"That's the spirit!" he said to General Allen, knowing when to praise as well as when to hound an officer on the field. "That's my fighter. I told you we could kick their behinds out of M'Sila. Those two Kraut tank battalions just high-tailed it east on the road to Barika. They've got a railhead there, and I want it."

At that moment, a barrage of artillery fire came in on the American positions again, sending many men to ground, but Patton and Allen stood firm, leaning over a map spread out on the warm hood of a jeep.

"That's just covering fire for their retreat," said Patton, exonerated and pleased with what his troops had accomplished. "So we want Barika, and I want 9th Infantry to keep pushing on that ridge overlooking the valley to the north. That's good ground up there. See how it frowns on this rail line from Ben Mansour? That's the main line east. This other one here up through Bougie will dead end at Fort Melila northwest of Constantine. So I want the 9th to cut that line off. Then I'll send both armored divisions right through this open country east to Barika. I'll want your boys right along with them."

"That's a good distance east," said Allen. "Do we have the fuel?"

"No but I'll find it. Then, once we get Barika, I'll establish our forward depot there, and we'll push northwest to Batna."

“Looks like some pretty rough country.”

“Damn right it is,” said Patton. “It’s these goddamn mountains. Well, they didn’t stop the Romans. Old Constantine the Great was one tough hombre. They named that city after him, and from Batna, we can push right up the rail line and take the place. Then the Limeys can push on up the coast to Bone, and I’ll turn east again for Tebessa. That’s right on the Tunisian border, a perfect place to set up shop for the next phase of the campaign. Hell, from there its only 150 miles or so to the coast. We can blow right through Tunisia and cut the Germans in two. That will cut off Rommel’s retreat before he gets a mind to come this way.”

“Rommel? You itching to tangle with him, General?”

“Why not? He’s been stuck at Mersa Brega for a good long while, or so Ike tells me. Now they say he’s gone and given the British another bloody nose east of Sirte. Looks like we’ll have to step up and finish the job. Our new Allies can’t seem to get things done.”

That was vintage Patton. In one brief session with a map on the hood of that jeep, he had already planned his entire march to victory through Algeria to the Tunisian border, and from there across Tunisia to Sfax. He would soon learn that it was easier to make his plans than it would be to carry them out. The German Army was by no means beaten here yet. Von Arnim was fully capable of holding any ground he chose, but he had a problem too—Adolf Hitler.

* * *

“So what do we do?” said the General. Von Arnim was now nominal commander of the 5th Panzer Army, charged with the defense of all Algeria against a combined British American force that was strengthening day by day. Kesselring was now the overall theater commander, with Rommel his sturdy knight in the east, fresh off his victory against the 8th Army.

“That is the question of the hour,” said Kesselring. “I certainly know what we should do, but given this stand fast order from Hitler, the situation gets a little more complicated. Look how our line is stretched out all along the Tellien Atlas Mountains. It runs from Blida, just south of Algiers, and all the way east to M’Sila.”

“The British have taken Blida,” said von Arnim.

“Yes, and the Americans have just taken M’Sila. Now... We’ve got one good rail line that connects all the way through to Constantine, and the Americans are very close to it here, near Mansourah. That’s where I’ve posted KG Barenthin on this ridge to stop them, but Fisher in 10th Panzer Division says they brought us yet another infantry division, and a good one this time. He doesn’t think we should continue to hold as we are, and I fully agree. I’ve ordered him to break off his attack at M’Sila, but to keep that rail line well covered.”

“If you want to get east, now is the time we should do it,” said von Arnim. “Wait any longer and they will find a way to cut that rail line. “Look... We ought to set everything up this way. Anchor the defense on the coast at Les Falais, just east of Bougie. Run the line through Setif, and then tie it off at Batna. There’s no easy way around that southern flank if we hold there. The ground is terrible.”

“Yes, I see this quiet clearly, but we still have the question of Hitler’s order to hold Algiers.”

“Well look what Rommel did! He just flew to OKW himself and got everything he wanted. Why don’t you go there and spell this out, just like Rommel. I’m sure you could easily get the support of Keitel and Jodl; Halder as well.”

“I could have them all in my back pocket, but that may not move Hitler one inch. He isn’t happy with what’s been going on in Russia. Winter is coming, and you know what happened last year. He wants that city on the Volga and the Russians are holding on to it like a dog with a bone.”

“So now he wants us to do the same here, at Algiers? The British already have troops in the city. 327th has only been fighting a delaying action there. General Kesselring, this American General, Patton, he’s a real firebrand. He can surely read a map just as we can, and mark my words, he’ll push hard to cut that rail line soon, if he isn’t already.”

Kesselring nodded heavily, pursing his lips with frustration. “I have already had to send half of the Herman Goring Division to support Fisher. Soon I’ll have to send the other half, and then there will be no mechanized force to backstop the defense at Algiers.”

“We should just abandon the place,” said von Arnim. “We should move east now while we can, orders or no orders. We could simply say that we were forced to do so, that the British just keep moving more and more troops

over from their forces in Spain. I've already positioned the rolling stock."

"General Montgomery is reportedly moving his headquarters forward to Algiers," said Kesselring. "You want him to say he beat you?"

"I could care less. What I want is to get to ground I can easily defend. The defense near Algiers is already badly outflanked. We're holding because the troops on that line are good enough to do so, and the American infantry is still green."

"Yes," said Kesselring. "Continue with your arrangements to move east, but keep a lid on it. As for Algiers, keep the 327th fighting there as long as possible. The minute the Allies put out that they've got the entire city, Hitler will explode again. At the moment, he is fixated on the East Front. We may just be able to pull off a redeployment without him noticing it too much."

"I'm already pulling some of the air mobile troops off the line and sending them by rail to Bougie," said von Arnim. "Kubler's mountain troops will be next. If we do this right, then we can pull it off without much change in the daily front report to OKW. By just looking at the map, it will seem that the lines of battle remain the same, that we are holding, but the bulk of our best troops will get east, one way or another. But when the balloon finally pops?" Von Arnim gave Kesselring a wary look.

"Then we shall see. It may be that one or both of us loses our jobs here, but we will have at least handed our successors a position they can have every expectation of holding, and an army to do that. Don't worry, General. My head is bigger than yours. I'll be the first to go on the chopping block."

The lines of battle did seem to hold their places on the map for the next several days, but all the while the trains were marshaling at receiving points, and the Germans were conducting one of those masterful strategic withdrawals Kesselring would become famous for. He was an expert in defensive maneuvers, and could read the ground better than any other General when it came to picking out a good place to hold, and knowing when he had to move.

The toughest thing he had to do was make it seem that Algiers was being held to the last. The 327th Infantry Division had only been at about 60% strength there, and now it was down to about six battalions. He told them to be stubborn, and it was house to house as the dogged 43rd Wessex bore the brunt of the attack, pushing into the outskirts of the city on the 13th of October. By that time, all of 22nd Luftland Division, and Kubler's mountain

troops had deftly made their way to the trains and started the journey east.

The American 3rd Division was slow to advance and take over the ground the enemy once held, all difficult high mountain country in the Tellien Atlas. By the time they did get up there, moving cautiously up the road to Ain Bessem, the Germans were long gone. In another day or two all the ground between Algiers and Bougie would be successfully evacuated, and those troops were already being posted to new positions south of Les Falaise.

Patton had clucked when a company from 13th Recon, CCB, 1st Armored, had probed out as far east to reach Barika. That report was just hours old when a battalion of the 104th Panzergrenadiers supported by tanks and KG Luder showed up to summarily evict the Americans. They had been told to screen the roads from that town to the northeast, where Kubler's mountain troops were arriving at Batna. They would be the ideal force to hold in the hilly ground in that sector.

The German withdrawal would largely be complete by the 14th of October. The price was the 327th Division near Algiers. No more than two battalions and a company of engineers would ever get east, along with the division artillery, headquarters and some flak guns. The last four battalions would still fight for Algiers, delaying Monty's entry there as long as possible.

Bougie itself was also abandoned, though not before the port and airfields had been subjected to demolition. The new defensive front would be anchored on the coast just east of Bougie by the 16th Regiment of the 22nd Luftland Division. 65th Regiment came next, then the Fallschirmjagers of 7th Flieger and KG Barenthin, their lines ending at Setif on the main rail running east. Another group of these tough soldiers had also just arrived at the port of Bone, under Koch, so the Germans still had plenty of good infantry.

Fairly rugged highlands ran east and south from Setif, and von Arnim positioned Fischer's 10th Panzer Division to watch the passes. Kübler still had seven battalions of good mountain troops around Batna, and then, behind it all, Herman Goering's troops would be the fire Brigade.

It would take Kesselring, along with the combined weight of the entire General Staff at OKW, to convince Hitler that the position they had selected east of Algiers was one they believed they could hold. The rapid advance of the Allies would now meet a much better organized defense, and 5th Panzer Army continued to build up supplies in Tunis and Bizerte.

* * *

“Hot damn,” said Patton. “We’ve got them on the run again. My boys pushed them right out of M’Sila, and we’ve just retaken Barika as well. Now it’s on to Batna. That’s the real prize. We get that, and I’ll have their flank turned again.”

“Hold on George,” came a voice, and in walked General Omar Bradley, sent in by Eisenhower to help him look things over on the front, and troubleshoot problems. He had not come on the scene until the defeat at Kasserene raised a lot of questions, but in this history, he had just been selected out by Eisenhower for this special role.

Patton turned, smiling broadly. “Brad,” he said warmly. “How are you?”

“Fine George, but it’s the army I’m here to worry about.”

“What do you mean worry? Things couldn’t be better. I was just telling Truscott here that we’ve got the Huns on the run again. Pushed them right out of M’Sila, and that was Rommel’s old outfit, 10th Panzer. Come on, have a look for yourself.” He gestured to the map.

Bradley came over to take a look, though he already knew things that Patton was not privy too. Radio intercepts and ULTRA had picked up the German intention to withdraw. The conversations between von Arnim and Kesselring had been rather transparent. He knew that Kesselring didn’t want the fight at Algiers, but he also had to give Patton credit for keeping the pressure up on the flank, and the fighting at M’Sila had been the culmination of that maneuver on his part.

“Damn good job at M’Sila,” said Bradley. “But the British have been complaining about 34th Infantry—said they were dragging their feet in the push for Algiers.”

“Supplies, Brad. That’s all my fault. It took everything I could get my hands on to keep those two armored divisions out there moving. This is hard country—few roads worth the name, wadis and salt pans everywhere, and no rail lines feeding my move around this flank to M’Sila. That was the key. Every mile I pushed east while the Limeys were knocking on the door at Algiers, was one more mile the Germans had to hold on their flank. They tried to stop me—threw in the whole 10th Panzer Division, but our boys came out on top. Now I want this place—Batna.”

“Good lord, George. Talk about hard country. Those mountains look damn near impassible, particularly for armor.”

“The whole country is damn near impassible, but we made it all the way here, didn’t we? I’ve pushed them 700 miles in 30 days since we landed in Casablanca.”

“Outstanding, but now Ike thinks we need a pause.”

“A pause? What for?”

“As soon as we clear out the last pockets in Algiers, Montgomery wants to move two divisions over from Spain. He thinks we should coordinate our next offensive and not operate independently—Allies and all.”

“Coordinate? He’ll take a month before he decides to do anything. Allies? You let Montgomery settle in and he’ll want to run the whole goddamned show out here.”

“Well, George, your corps is strung out from here all the way back to 34th infantry near Algiers. You’ve got to consolidate, bring up supplies, and they want to land fresh tanks for the armored divisions at Algiers.”

“Well hell, we’ve got the Germans on the run, so now’s the time to keep moving. We let them settle into those mountains and it’ll be twice as hard to get around this flank.”

Bradley took a deep breath. “George, you might as well know this. Scuttlebutt has it that Kesselring moved heaven and earth to try and get permission from Hitler to make this withdrawal. They didn’t want Algiers, and they didn’t want M’Sila either. They were just locking horns with you there until they could convince the Führer to let them pull out.”

“Scuttlebutt,” said Patton, clearly unhappy. “Look, Brad, my men have fought hard out there. I won’t stand for somebody spreading a rumor that the Germans didn’t have their heart in this fight.”

“I feel the same way, but this fellow Kesselring is pretty cagey. Ike showed me the latest aerial photos. They pulled out alright, but now they’re setting up shop here, just west of Bougie on the coast, and the line will stretch all the way down to Batna. Now, you haven’t even made contact with them yet, but by the time you do, they’ll be dug in like Alabama ticks. This next push is going to need some muscle, because they’ve shortened their lines considerably with this move. All I’m saying is that when we do move again, we need to be ready. I saw trucks, jeeps, artillery strung out for miles east of here. We need to consolidate, and Ike sent me here to see that it gets done.”

“I see,” said Patton. “Brad, how about this. I could use a good Deputy Commander. Suppose you and I become allies? We’d make a great team out here. I’ll come up with the crazy ideas, and you see that I get the supply to do the job.”

“Thank you, George, but that will have to be up to Ike. Now why don’t we start by having a good look around. I want to see what your divisions look like. After that, you can make your pitch to Eisenhower, and I’d be honored to ride shotgun with you out here any time.”

That was what would happen, the beginning of a partnership that would see many battle lines ahead in this war. It was fire and ice, with Patton’s dash and headstrong nature tempered by Bradley’s caution and common sense. Little by little, the men, and the machines that would prosecute the war to a successful end in the old history, were now gathering in the parched terrain of Africa, which was becoming a testbed for the fledgling US Army.

But the real test was yet to come.

Chapter 18

“Come.”

Karpov knew who would come through that door. The *Abakan* had been seen approaching on radar long ago, and Tyrenkov had already contacted him to explain the situation. He had been on the bridge when the basked was lowered over the helo deck, swaying a bit with the wind, for *Kirov* was still in the cold northern waters of the Sea of Okhotsk, up north of Sakhalin Island. The cold was increasing, the ice already beginning to form, and he had been seeing to the last of the major supply convoys to the small port of Okha, delivering food, fuel, munitions, and trucks he had obtained from the Americans. Now he was in his stateroom, having given orders that Fedorov should report to him immediately.

And he was not happy.

The door opened, and in walked Fedorov, removing his hat as he entered, and tucking it under his arm. Karpov took a deep breath, looking up with a sour expression on his face.

“So,” he said, “the prodigal son comes home at last. Sit down, Fedorov. You and I have a great deal to discuss, and you can be thankful that I allowed you the dignity of coming here on your own two legs, instead of being escorted by a squad of my men.”

“I see your pet gorilla is posted outside,” said Fedorov, taking a seat. “Plan on turning me over to him after this?”

“If that is what it takes to get you to understand an order when you hear one.”

“That would have been a lot easier if I wasn’t desperately trying to save that KA-40, and everyone aboard. You put a goddamned missile on me, Karpov.”

“Just like you put *five* on Orlov when *he* jumped ship. That was, after all, what you were planning. Correct? But you didn’t really think you could get through my security to Ilanskiy, did you? So where in god’s name did you think you were going? Let me guess. You were so dead set on getting to Sergei Kirov, and if you couldn’t go kill him in 1908, you thought you’d go

cozy up to him in 1942.”

“Initially, my only thought was to save my skin and see to the safety of my mission team,” said Fedorov. “What was I supposed to do? Comply with your order so you could take another shot at us? What would you have done in my place?”

Karpov smiled, raising an eyebrow. “I suppose I would have done the same, but you have become quite a nuisance. It was you who put Volsky on to me when I first tried to take the ship, and it was you who came after me in that goddamn submarine. Then you pull this little hide and seek routine this time around, until I saw through your little ruse. Now this.”

“You want to look at things from my perspective?” said Fedorov. “It was you who tried to unlawfully seize control of the ship, subverting Orlov to back you up and then locking Volsky in the sickbay so you could drop a nuke on the Allied fleets. And it was you who refused the Admiral’s direct order to cease operations in 1908 and return with us, and look around. Take a good look at the world that resulted. Your little operation out there on Sakhalin would not be happening now if not for your obstinate disobedience.”

“If I had finished what I started there, without your damn interference.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Captain. That’s your real rank, isn’t it? And it’s my rank as well. You forget that I accepted you as my *Starpom*, receiving your pledge to serve, just as I gave you mine when you offered me the job here. I did so in the hope that I could have some influence over these events, and also in the hope that you had sobered up a bit after that nightmare when you went after Admiral Togo. I thought we had reached an understanding. After all, I was acting on your orders to undertake that mission. Then you throw a missile my way, and all bets are off. Now... you can trot in your security men and stand up Grilikov to cast his big shadow on the bridge whenever you’re there, but you’ve forgotten one thing, Karpov—the crew of this ship. They were the ones that stopped you off Oki Island, not me and Gromyko aboard *Kazan*. I thought you had learned at least one thing in all of this, but it seems you haven’t. *The crew*—without their cooperation and support, this ship cannot operate. You arranged that clever little meeting at Murmansk, again undermining the Admiral’s authority, and commandeering this ship under false pretenses. Thought you could pull one over on a witless crew, except for me. I saw right through your scam, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it just then.”

“Is that what you were doing, bidding your time here with this agreement to serve as Starpom? You thinking to bend a few ears and work up the crew against me now. You know damn well I won’t let that happen this time. Besides, the crew *is* witless. They don’t know what’s happened—only you know. Well, I can manage you easily enough, and after this latest insubordination, you don’t give me much choice.”

“I’m not the only one who remembers.” Fedorov threw that out like a cold stone in hot water, and Karpov’s face registered real surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. Now I don’t know how it was that I had my head filled with everything we went through before. Volsky was oblivious, as was most everyone else, even your other self. But I remembered. I went round and round with that, trying to figure out if all those memories were simply dumped into my head through some strange effect caused by the paradox—or if I was actually the same man who got slapped around by Orlov and sent down to sick bay on that very first sortie we made. I still can’t say which is true, but I can tell you one thing—I’m not alone.”

“Explain.”

“I mean other people on this ship are waking up, one by one. Something very strange is happening here.”

“Who? Who else knows? Don’t try to hide them, Fedorov. You know damn well I’ll see through them as easily as I saw through you.”

“Orlov, for one. Yes, your first co-conspirator woke up one day below decks, and you can be damn thankful that I was there when it happened.”

“What?”

“He started remembering, having bad dreams as he explained it to me. Then the dreams became recollections, and then he woke up. He knows, Captain. He remembers everything, and he was none too happy with you when it all came back. It seems that the two of you had a little falling out back then. And why do you think he jumped ship? Because he got busted and sent down to serve with the Marines while you wormed your way back onto the bridge with your false oath to the Admiral, and then again to me.”

This came as a real shock to Karpov, for it was something that he had never really considered. In fact, he had been counting on the crew operating here with a clean slate. If they started to remember... If they suddenly knew everything like Fedorov.... He shifted in his chair, his anger abating, and now

looked at Fedorov a little differently.

“Are there others?”

“I believe so.”

“How, Fedorov? What is happening here?”

“I wish I knew. I told you that just before Paradox Hour, things got very strange on the ship. You remember what I said about Lenkov? Well, it got worse. Men started to go missing, and no one seemed to remember them ever being there. They were disappearing, one by one, and by God, those same men are right here now, and now I’m starting to think they’re going to wake up, just as Orlov did, one by one.” He was only now just coming to this realization as he said this to Karpov, who had a very harried look on his face now.

“You mean to say they might *all* remember in time?”

“That’s what I think is happening. We handed Time a real dilemma, two ships, two crews, and what was she to do with them both laying claim to the same moments? You weren’t here when it happened. You were off on your airship—elsewhere. The men on the ship didn’t have that protection. Time had to choose, or so I believed. But it seems she’s come up with another solution. I think Time is doing what amounts to a save with replace.”

“What?”

“Yes... You save a file you’ve been working on, but forget to rename it. So it overwrites the old file with the new. You’re writing a story, or a report, and you don’t want to lose it so you hit that save button, and the old file is updated with all your work that day. Only in this instance, the story has already been written. That’s what got dumped into my head if it happened that way, and I’m willing to bet that somewhere—out there, somewhere, I was one of those men who went missing on the original ship. And if my theory is correct, it will happen to everyone else—even Lenkov, god rest his soul. I’d hate to be there when he remembers what happened to him....”

Silence.

The two men just sat there, forgetting their own petty quarrel and rivalry now. There was something else going on, something deeper, almost sinister from Karpov’s perspective. If they all remembered.... If they all suddenly knew all the things he had done, then Fedorov was correct in what he said a moment ago. He *needed* this crew, for in a very real sense, they were *Kirov*, they were the heart and soul of the ship. Without their Aye Aye to his order,

the ship would go nowhere, nor would any man here stand to battle stations, and the missiles under that forward deck were absolutely useless. He had told himself that when he took command here, but power had a way of making his head just a little too big for his hat.

“Where is Orlov?” he said at last, his first instinct being to cover that square.

“Well Captain, Admiral, I’ll call you what you please. We have another problem now.” He told Karpov what had happened on the mission; how the ship reached 1908 as they overflew Tunguska, and how he could not find that timely cruelty within him after all. He told him what was said to Sergei Kirov, and what had happened to Orlov as they ascended the stairs.

“He did what? He sneezed?”

“And he must have reflexively moved his hand to his nose,” said Fedorov. “That broke the chain of contact that I was counting on pulling us all to the very same timeframe here. Why I came through, and not Orlov, is just another little snicker from Mother Time as she laughs at us. But we’ve got a real problem here now. Orlov went missing, and Orlov knows everything that happened—everything.”

“God almighty,” said Karpov, a look of shock and distress on his face. “Where could he be, Fedorov? Where could he have possibly gone?”

“That’s anybody’s guess, but it would most likely have to be some time in which he did not already exist.”

“But yet my brother and I share this same time.”

“That I haven’t figured out yet. Yes, you were elsewhere when he shifted here, and that’s the only reason I can put to it.”

Now Karpov remembered his own tortuous reasoning on this very issue, and the reason he had called off Fedorov’s mission in the first place....

Time makes mistakes.

That was all he could think of. Time isn’t perfect, and the chaos they had caused was so great, that she slipped a few stitches. That satisfied where things like the magazine they found were concerned, but not for his own personal fate.

I’m not just anybody, he thought. I’m Vladimir Karpov. I built this entire world! I was the one who pissed off Orlov. Absent that, he never jumps ship. So all of this is my doing, because I am first cause for this world to exist. That is why I persist here—why I will continue to persist. Time might dearly love

to get rid of me, but she can't, I'm just too damn important. Without me, none of this ever happens.

But what about my brother?

Who is the pretender to the throne here, me or my brother? How could time allow him to enter my world while I was here? Ah... but I wasn't here. That's what all that travail was aboard Tunguska. I was somewhere else when my brother self appeared here aboard Kirov. My brother was supposed to replace me! Time was planning to crown my brother king here. That bitch was trying to eliminate me completely, but something happened. I eluded her grasp and survived.

So time is quite content to let this time line persist—in fact, that is exactly what she is planning! There is only one errant thread in her loom as she weaves all this together again—me!”

Now a real fear struck him, and one he had tiptoed around in his own thinking for some time. “Fedorov,” he said, his voice lowered ominously. “If what you say is true—Orlov remembering, other crewmen waking up—then what happens if my younger brother remembers? Have you thought about that?”

“Interesting proposition? In one sense, I was thinking that as the two of you are not identical, two different men in so many ways, that Time made allowances. Yet if the other version of yourself does start remembering, that could get very thorny.”

“Well I’ve told him things that happened; things we did. It doesn’t seem to have shaken anything loose. Maybe he can’t remember if I’ve got those memories locked away in my head. How about that possibility?”

“I wish I could say I knew,” said Fedorov. “Perhaps Kamenski might weigh in on this, if he were still with us. But what will happen concerning your brother isn’t something we can control. Orlov, however, is another matter. He’s going to turn up somewhere, and my first thought was to start scouring the history to see if I could find any clues.”

“You mean in the event he appears in the past?”

“Yes. Remember that you fell out of a shift and appeared here long before we did—in 1938. That’s what gave you the time to work your way into Kolchak’s web. Orlov might do that. Technically, he could appear in any time after that moment in 1908, and before the 30th of June in 1940, which was when we arrived here again after attempting to shift forward with *Kazan*.

He could also appear some time in our future. But speaking of that, we have another problem—*Kazan*.”

“What about it?”

“The submarine has reappeared. Gromyko is here again. We picked up a message beacon on our secure radio set. I actually spoke with him.”

“What? He sent a message? We never heard it.”

“Perhaps atmospheric conditions were not good, but remember, I was much closer to his position when we picked it up.”

“Where was he?”

“Up near Murmansk, and he wanted to talk. In fact, if you want to know the truth, I was trying to arrange a rendezvous with him.”

“So you could lock arms and come after me with that damn sub?” There was a flash of anger in Karpov’s eyes now.”

“Nothing had gone that far in my thinking,” said Fedorov. “Don’t get yourself all in a fit. But he’s here, and *Kazan* is here, and now we have that to consider. I never made my rendezvous with him, as we made that incredible detour to 1908. I almost could not believe my luck in that, but when it came right down to it, sitting there with a pistol in my hand under the table, I just could not kill that young man. I couldn’t do it.”

Karpov’s eyes narrowed, but he nodded his head. “I didn’t think you could either, and as you can see, everything is still here as it was. Your theory about our reaching an event here that would knock out some key pillar in the line of causality is all bullshit. That was what I figured out after you departed, and why I cancelled the mission. I don’t know what might have happened if you did kill Sergei Kirov, but I wasn’t going to take the chance of finding out. So I... over reacted—the missile. Understand?”

Fedorov knew that was as close to an apology as he might get from Karpov, and he nodded his head. “And I over reacted as well,” he said. “See how easy it is to fall back on reflex, open old wounds, become enemies when that’s the last damn thing this world needs of us now. We’re in some deep shit here, Karpov. We’re responsible for this whole mess, and it’s up to us to do what we can to clean it up.”

“Still thinking we can reset all the pieces on the board? We can’t, Fedorov. This is the game in front of us now, and all we can do is make the best moves possible in this situation, win, lose, or draw. Time is settling in to the reality we’ve created here. You and I remember things that never

happened here—all that bullshit we threw at each other when you first came in. I think Time has abandoned that game, called it a draw, and moved on. This is where things count now—this game decides it for the world championship, and were' two pawns down, with one knight missing—Orlov, and another out there somewhere that we need to move to a good square—Gromyko.”

“That was what I came to in the end,” said Fedorov. “This is it for us now. We’ll never get home, and we’ll never switch it all back. Frankly, if I were you, I’d blow that damn railway inn to hell and be done with it, because you’re right, Karpov, this is the only game left now, and by god, we’ve got to win it. Volkov is out there raising hell, and now the Japanese have yet another edge with that destroyer. It’s time we showed some muscle.”

“Now you’re talking,” said Karpov. “Yes, now we fight to win this thing. Help me. Stand with me, and let us forget the past. The future is enough of a burden for us, and something tells me it will take both of us to carry it.”

Fedorov offered a solemn nod of his head, then extended his hand. “Allies,” he said. “And now we fight to win.”

Part VII

Fire on the Volga

*“The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.”*

— **T. S. Eliot:** *Four Quartets*

Chapter 19

Volga Front: October 21, 1942

“A fine mess,” said Manstein as he convened the meeting at Army Group Don’s HQ. They had moved to Morozovsk, largely because much of the ground south of Tatsinskaya, though German controlled, had not been thoroughly patrolled, and the threat from Partisans was very real. Morozovsk was also closer to the action near Oblivskaya, and the General wished to gather his Lieutenants to plan what would happen next. There were a lot of hats around the table, Knobelsdorff, Wietersheim, and Division Commanders Theodore Eicke of the 3rd SS Division, and Hermann Balck of the 11th Panzer.

“Just how strong is the threat developing towards Oblivskaya?” asked Manstein, looking at Eicke.

“We were hard pressed for the last week, but my men held firm. The division was close to full strength when we were up north. Since then, casualties have been heavy, but we still have a lot of fight in us, particularly after the arrival of those heavy panzers.”

“Good,” said Manstein. “Are you still under heavy pressure?”

“Not at the moment. They have come a long way, and also fought hard to get here. I think they are low on fuel and supplies now, and there are few good roads from here up to their bridgeheads over the Don. We should have cleaned those up long ago, and before Steiner moved for Kalach.”

“True,” said Manstein, “but we barely had the infantry to cover the front. An attack was out of the question. I had to fly to Hitler’s HQ just to make sure I could get us your Panzer Korps, Herr Wietersheim. What is the situation on that end of the field?”

“I have my 24th Panzer Division on the line now, and it has stabilized the situation north of Tatsinskaya. They fell back there as we advanced, and the front is now about 45 kilometers north of the airfield. General Lenski’s division is sitting right on the seam between two of their Shock Armies. He has our 305th Infantry to his right, and I moved the 72nd onto the line to his left. But General Knobelsdorff has been greedy this week,” he said with a

smile. "He's stolen away my 9th Panzer Division!"

"It could not be helped," said Manstein. "Otto is going to bear the brunt of what is to come. That was some very fancy footwork to salvage the situation there."

"You can thank General Balck," said Knobelsdorff, a well decorated general with a pair of Iron Crosses and his Silver Panzer Badge prominent on his uniform. "I was barely on the scene after Kempf left, and by the time I got there, Balck had mastered the situation."

Balck nodded, never one to seek praise, but nonetheless happy to have a job well done acknowledged. "The division did the work," he said. "The enemy was cocky, and heedless at times. Our boys taught them a few lessons."

"Yes," said Manstein, "and it appears they are learning quicker than we thought. Note how they enfiladed Eicke's division on both sides, and by operating two mobile corps in tandem on each end. I think we must destroy these formations while they are regrouping now. If we give them time to resupply and get up fresh vehicles, this will all start again. So here is what I propose. A pity we could not save Surovinko earlier, but now I think we must get it back. General Wietersheim, please forgive me, but as your 9th Panzer has already moved so far east, I will reassign that division to Knobelsdorff's 48th Korps. In return, I am bringing up the 23rd Panzer from the Rostov sector. The attack on that city needs infantry, and it will not be forthcoming for some time. Halder has given everything to von Rundstedt. That said, this river here, the Bystraya, marks the Corps boundary, right where you have positioned your 24th Panzer Division, and right at the seam between the enemy 2nd and 3rd Shock Armies. Everything west of that goes to your Korps, General Wietersheim, including the 294th arriving from Yugoslavia, and the two Luftwaffe Field Divisions."

"You mean the two Luftwaffe Field *Regiments*," said Wietersheim. "They have no more than three infantry battalions each."

"So combine them to make a single division. I wish I could get you more, but there is nothing else available close enough to get here in reasonable time. If necessary, we can pull Schmidt's 50th Division out of the Donets Basin, and that fight will have to wait until we stabilize the situation here. As for the troops east of Wietersheim, the four Infantry Divisions on the line go to General Hollidt, who is presently setting up his HQ at Chern. Knobelsdorff

will take the four mobile divisions. The last is arriving at Oblivskaya even now—3rd Motorized.”

“It is relieving my men as we speak,” said Eicke. “I am moving my division south of the Chir, right astride the road where they were advancing from Surovinko. Don’t worry, they won’t get any farther on that road now.”

“Good,” said Manstein. “Then, with three Panzer Divisions in hand, I think we can attack. General Eicke, it looks like Sheller’s 9th Panzer will be on your right, and then General Balck’s 11th. The enemy is occupying the ground south of Surovinko, and we must take it back. I want to control everything south and west of the Chir. So then, General Balck, work some of your magic, and swing around this feature here, State Farm 79 on my map, about twelve kilometers south of Surovinko. Then, if you swing up towards that town, the Chir will cover your right flank. I wish I had another infantry division to post there, and I will see about moving Schlomer’s 3rd Motorized later. For now, I think it best we keep it at Oblivskaya. Gentlemen, we attack tomorrow morning.”

* * *

The situation on the Volga Front was now markedly different from that of the old history. To begin with, the composition of forces involved was very different. On the Soviet side, Armies like the 62nd, 64th, 66th and 24th were composed of units very close to the old history. It seemed that certain units remained stubbornly embedded in this history’s order of battle, as if pulled there by some gravitational force of time. Yet Chuikov also had forces that were never present, like the crack 2nd Volga Rifles, and brigades arriving from Saratov, Samara, and as far away as Novgorod. 65th Army was instead replaced by the 9th and 11th Rifles Corps, but those two formations had about the same overall strength as Batov’s old Army. Beyond this, all the main forces that had been assembled in the Don Bridgeheads from Serafimovich to as far away as Boguchar, were all composed of the troops initially sent by Karpov to form those five Shock Armies. Four were now present, the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th, and to these Zhukov had added Soviet Ski troops, tank Brigades, motorized regiments and most of the artillery and AT forces.

On the German side, the Rumanians, Italians and Hungarians were

nowhere to be seen on this front. In their place, posted on the long line opposite the Don Bridgeheads, was the German 11th Army, with one Korps now withdrawn east of the Don by Steiner, and one more arriving to shore up the line after Zhukov's counterattack. The presence of Steiner's SS was in itself the most dramatic change. Here were gathered the cream of the Waffen SS troops, all divisions that had been greatly strengthened prior to Operation Blue. And with them was Grossdeutschland and the new Brandenburg Division, possibly the two best divisions in the Army. Yet in considering the units that were now arriving in response to Zhukov's counterattack, there was Hermann Balck and his 11th Panzer Division, as if again fated to fight on this ground, and other divisions like 23rd Panzer, 336th Infantry, 294th Infantry that had once formed ad hoc detachments to try and stem the Soviet tide had also arrived, along with the 7th and 8th Luftwaffe Divisions.

Notably absent was von Paulus and his 6th Army. He would not suffer the sad fate that had befallen him when the Russians bagged some 20 Axis Divisions in the pocket near Stalingrad. Now, however, and largely by Steiner's own willful choice, there were nine German Divisions and fourteen from Orenburg all east of the Don, a force about the same size as the one the Soviets once bagged, some 220,000 men. The troops from Orenburg were entirely ahistorical, a force that would have never existed at all if not for the alterations to the history caused by *Kirov's* earlier interventions. Even more prominent was the fact that those troops now occupied all the ground east of the mighty Volga, except Ostrov Sarpinskiy and Krasny Sloboda Islands, which were both Soviet occupied.

The fact that Volkov's troops now held Krasnoarmeysk, and were facing down the Soviet 64th Army in Beketova along the southern sectors of the battle zone, meant that all the troops east of the Don at least had some overland supply line available. They were not totally isolated, even though the most direct route, the roads and rails coming through Tatsinskaya, Morozovsk and along the Chir, had been cut by the Soviets with the capture of Surovinko.

The rail line east and south of the Don that went through Kotelnikovo to Sal'sk was also of no use. It had been torn apart during the fighting as Volkov advanced near Kotelnikovo, and beyond Sal'sk, the Kuban sector south of Rostov remained Soviet occupied. So supplies were only coming up on the rail line and river barges from Volkov's stronghold at Astrakhan to

Krasnoarmeysk, though the Germans would get only food and fuel. They would now have to depend entirely on the Luftwaffe to deliver ammo, spare parts and fresh troops.

That air link was by no means reliable. The Germans barely had parity in the air, and the enemy *Sturmoviks* were coming in increasing numbers, their circles of death darkening the skies overhead and making it very hazardous for unescorted *Stuka* squadrons. An infantry division might need 50 tons of ammo per day, more if on the offensive. One of Steiner's SS divisions would need 70 to 100 tons, and this requirement could double if the division was in heavy combat. In the old history, the Luftwaffe delivered a total of 8350 tons over 72 days, or an average of about 117 tons per day. It would therefore only be capable of delivering a third of the ammo required for those nine German divisions Steiner now commanded. His solution was to take three of the four infantry divisions he had withdrawn, and use them to man the northern and western segments of his position, along the line of the Don itself from Vertyachi all the way to Kalach.

On that front, he only had two key areas to defend where there were sites that could support a river crossing. The 129th held a small bridgehead west of Kalach, the 102nd watched the area from Golubinskaya and north along the river; and the 87th held Vertyachi, with its lines extending east along the northern flank. Those three divisions were essentially static, and simply sitting on defense, so they would need no significant daily ammo ration at all unless the Soviets pressed a cross-river attack. This left him with his five mobile divisions, 1st and 2nd SS, Grossdeutschland, Brandenburg, and Wiking Division further south near Nizhne Chirskaya. That division, having fought hard, first at Golubinskaya and then at Surovinko, was now being relieved by Volkov's 2nd Orenburg Army, and it would go into reserve for some much needed rest and refitting again.

The other four mobile divisions were on attack, benefiting from the sudden windfall of supplies trucked in from Oblivskaya and Surovinko just before the Soviets cut that route. When Steiner moved his HQ, he had brought all the supplies the Korps truck pool could carry, and so he found himself with more than adequate supply to attempt what he was now planning and executing—a sudden violent attack to take Volgograd by storm. He calculated that he could mount a sustained 10 to 14-day offensive with all his mobile divisions, along with support from the 75th Infantry Division,

which was now on that line.

In the meantime, the Russians had invested Kalach with 24th Army, and then sent the 9th and 11th Rifle Corps south towards the confluence of the Chir and Don, where Volkov's troops were now relieving the Vikings. Two Guards Rifle Corps, and three Tank Corps now formed the 5th Tank Army operating in the area between Surovinko and Oblivskaya along the Chir. West of Oblivskaya, was 4th Shock Army, then 3rd Shock, and finally 2nd Shock, their lines extending all the way to the ground some 50 kilometers north of Tatsinskaya.

Then, as Zhukov's offensive engine continued to burn coal and build steam, he pulled another army together by extracting three tank corps that had been at Tula, Serpukhov and Ryazan. Ad hoc infantry replaced them on the line, which was now a stagnant front, and these three Corps were rushed south into his Don Bridgehead zone, the 3rd, 7th and 10th Tank Corps. This new group would be designated 1st Tank Army, and to strongly augment this force, he pulled the Siberian 5th Shock Army from the Volkov front in the north. Volkov had no offensive capability in that sector, and so the rail lines had been busy, delivering three rifle divisions, four cavalry divisions, two tank and two motorized brigades, and a pair of ski brigades.

So by robbing Peter to pay Paul, Zhukov had produced another very capable force to extend his offensive against the exposed German flank. Phase I, his Operation Uranus, had been a complete success. It had sealed off Kalach, and driven the Germans out of Surovinko. Now he would continue to press with 5th Tank Army against the stubborn German defense at Oblivskaya, while he unleashed his new 1st Tank Army with 5th Shock Group further west in what he was calling "Operation Saturn." He would direct this attack at the area of Morozovsk and Tatsinskaya, with the long term aim of capturing one or both of those key towns, which both had valuable airfields the Luftwaffe would need to resupply Steiner. That part of the plan was still forming, still mustering on the steppes to the north, but thus far, Operation Uranus had done all he had hoped it would.

Manstein did not think the Russians would attack like this so soon, or in such strength, particularly with the big crisis near Voronezh to contend with. Yet his military mind found the Soviet achievement quite impressive, even if he now had every confidence he could contain the threat. When the meeting at Morozovsk concluded, he did not yet know of the forces gathering to the

north in 5th Shock Army. The Russians would move by night, halt by day under white snow draped netting. The Luftwaffe spotted what looked like one large mechanized formation on the 20th, but no word had come to Army Group Don HQ by the 21st.

Manstein had gathered nine divisions to answer Zhukov's offensives, finally halting the Soviet advance and saving three of the four depot sites on the Chir, as far west as Tatsinskaya. Now, as the first snows began to fall on October 21st, his next battle would be fought to determine the fate of Volgograd. The Russians would fight to hold the city, while continuing to press attacks against the German lines of communications. Manstein would fight to prevent that, while Steiner sent the cream of his force into the warren of death and misery that had once been called Stalingrad.

*Note: Maps of these dispositions are available on the book pages for Thor's
Anvil at www.Writingshop.ws
See: General Situation, Oct 30, 1942*

Chapter 20

Steiner's attack on the 21st of October came as the first snows had dusted the frozen ground, darkening and chilling the memories of the troops that had fought and endured the Winter of 1941. Here it came again, promising to be colder, deeper, darker than ever, due to the blockage of sunlight that had been caused by the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano in the Pacific.

It brought with it an urgency that was redoubled by Steiner's mood. He had been driven from his headquarters on the Chir, saw his staff ignominiously packing up all his papers and effects, loading any vehicle at hand with all the supplies, food and fuel they could carry. He had chosen to withdraw east to join the bulk of his Korps, none too happy to see both 3rd and 5th SS left behind to try and halt the Soviet advance. He would now get the Wiking Division back as Volkov's troops relieved it near Nizhne Chirskaya, and for wergild after losing Totenkopf, he took all the infantry of Hansen's 54th Korps. Now he was determined to prove that his decision to withdraw east of the Don was one that would deliver a victory at Volgograd.

The Soviets had struggled to set up a perimeter in the north, where Das Reich had been driving towards a long fortified aqueduct that ran northwest from the Volga north of Rynok, shielding the main road and rail line from the north. The previous year, when Volkov had pressed his dogged offensive over the Volga north of the city, that aqueduct had been the strong line of defense that prevented Volkov's troops from pushing south and enveloping Volgograd from that direction. Now the Russian troops in those bunkers found an enemy at their back, and the engineers had been busy cutting gun ports in the pill boxes, so that all the AT and machineguns could be repositioned to cover an attack from the southwest.

Das Reich was leading that attack, having cut the main rail line at Samofalovka, where it dropped off its Pioneer Battalion, 3rd Panzergrenadier Battalion, two companies from the Recon Battalion and a company of tanks. They took up positions astride the rail line, where the Soviet 58th and 80th Light Tank Battalions were defending with the 99th Rifle Division. The rest of the division struck parallel to the aqueduct defense line, pushing for

Rynok. On their right, the full weight of the Leibstandarte Division was advancing on a nine kilometer front, right astride the road to Gorodische. There Chuikov had posted the 112th and 138th Rifle Divisions forward of the tree line sheltering a rail spur that diverted off the main line and ran east towards Rynok, eventually swinging south into the Factory district of northern Volgograd.

The battle hardened SS men hit the Soviet line like a sledgehammer, shattering the defensive front, infiltrating with fast moving recon elements, and pushing right to the outskirts of Gorodische. The pounding of 11th Army's heavy artillery was earth shaking, and overhead, *Stukas* rained bombs down on the unlucky Soviet Riflemen. 115th Special Brigade was also hit in that same attack, surrounded on the main road that passed just north of the fortified Gumrak Airfield.

Brandenburg Division came next, just south of Leibstandarte, its mission to push directly for that airfield at Gumrak, which Steiner wanted for his forward air supply base. In their way were the remnants of the 36th Guards Rifle Division. The attack was merciless, overrunning 3rd Regiment, surrounding the remainder of the division, and pushing through the hole in the line to attack the enemy division HQ. 75th Infantry was on their right, helping to open and widen the breach, as infantry does so well when it advances to hold the shoulder of any penetration by the mobile troops. They had hit the Russian 95th Rifle Division hard as well, and now that entire position was dissolving into confusion, with the fighting hand to hand wherever the Russian infantry refused to withdraw.

That would be the most serious breakthrough achieved that day, and just south of that breach, Grossdeutschland was pushing right up the main road to the newly built suburb of the city, Novo Kirovka. It had built up west of the river in the vicinity of the Oil Tank Farm, Nail Factory, and Water Works, and a new Red Square had also been built there opposite the ferry to Krasnaya Sloboda, the heavily fortified mid-stream island that stood as the first barrier of defense against any attack across the Volga from the east.

That area of the city had once been named Yelshanka, but now that district was moved south, closer to Beketova. The push by the Grossdeutschland Division, if successful, would be cutting off all of Shumilov's 64th Army, largely opposed by Volkov's troops, which were content to simply sit there and wait for the Soviets to withdraw. They had

been unable to move their enemy for years, and thought they would do no better now, yet with the Germans in the game, they would eagerly occupy ground their newfound ally forced the Russians to yield. Shumilov could not hold his present positions with Grossdeutschland behind him to the north.

All Chuikov had to try and stop this formidable attack was the 45th Rifle Division, understrength and low on supply. So the field phones at Chuikov's HQ near the old Army Barracks were ringing off the hook. His four rifle divisions between the aqueduct and Gumrak airfield were being swamped, and now they were attempting to fall back towards the city. A hole had developed south of Gumrak, where 36th Guard Division had been overrun and nearly destroyed by the Brandenburgers. Shumilov's troops to the south were now exposed, and would be forced to give up more ground, falling back towards the heavy urban areas closer to the river.

"Shumilov!" said Chuikov over the telephone line. "We cannot hold astride the road to Novo Kirovka. You must get your men back to the city!"

"Don't worry," came the reply. "I have two light tank brigades as a mobile reserve. They will cover the main road while I get the infantry back. But who will hold the center?"

"39th Guards is in the Worker's Settlement. I will try to bring in the 37th Guards tonight on the river barges."

"Under Volkov's guns?"

"They won't expect it. We've been running three or four barges a night on supply lifts. They've seen them, fired a few rounds of artillery, but made no real effort beyond that. I think I can get the men through. As it stands, I may not be able to get much back from the outer defense line west of the city, so we need those guardsmen."

"What about the 13th?"

"They're in the factory district, and the Germans are pushing for Rynok, so that is where they will stay."

"And the Volga Rifles?"

"Up on the aqueduct line, what's left of them. They came over the Don three days ago north of Vertyachi to help hold the aqueduct. As long as we have that, then we can get supplies fairly close to the city from the north, and ferry them in each night. It's our only option. We'll lose Gumrak Airfield by tomorrow."

"Very well," said Shumilov. "My army is still reasonably intact. I will

reposition to hold Novo Kirovka.”

“What about Beketova?” Chuikov cautioned. “If we give that up, then everything on Sarpinskiy Island is good for nothing.”

“I’ll leave two divisions there. Volkov’s boys will have to fight if they want winter quarters. I’ll not hand it to them. It was enough that we had to give up our fortified lines at Krasnoarmeysk!”

“Good,” said Chuikov. “Then you will be responsible for Yelshanka and Novo Kirovka, and God be with you. We got word from a cavalry reconnaissance brigade near the railroad bridge to the south. Volkov is relieving the German SS division that was holding near Nizhne Chirskaya. It’s heading north, so keep that in mind. I assume you will be moving your headquarters soon?”

“Tonight,” said Shumilov. “I will call you with the new location after we are set up.”

That night the position of the 62nd Army west of the city collapsed, with 45th, 95th and 112th Rifle Divisions virtually destroyed, and 36th Guards reduced to a single regiment, the division HQ overrun and captured. The remainder of the division would never see friendly lines again. Shumilov waited for cover of darkness to withdraw, his forces folding back and extending their lines towards Novo Kirovka to the north. His 13th Tank and 66th Special Rifle Brigades arrived there just in time to find the recon elements of the Grossdeutschland Division probing at the outskirts of the city.

As dawn came on the 22nd of October, elements of both 1st SS and the Brandenburgers had Gumrak Airfield surrounded, where the stubborn 72nd NKVD Brigade still held out in the fortified pillboxes around the complex. The Germans were pounding them with heavy artillery, being careful to avoid directing fires on the airstrip itself. Seeing what was happening, the NKVD Colonel Rybayev got on the radio and begged Chuikov to fire his guns at the airfield, in effect, calling friendly artillery down on his own position to attempt to damage the field. Chuikov refused. He could fire those guns any time he wished, and would not do so with brave men still fighting for that ground.

Further north the rest of the Brandenburgers, and elements of 1st SS, were consolidating after a hard night’s fighting. They advanced towards the city, coming upon the Pyolomny Ravine and finding it undefended. The enemy

had withdrawn towards the Kirov Flying School and the old Army Barracks where Chuikov had his HQ. Needless to say, like Shumilov, he was also moving his headquarters that day. 1st SS was now widely dispersed, having pushed right through Gorodiche and Aleksandrovka to approach the gnarled fingers of a balka that extended up from the Airfield Settlement. At the end of one withered branch of that feature, a stone rampart had been erected that extended in an arc to the south, covering the Flying School.

There were the remnants of 36th, 37th and 39th Guards Divisions, each reduced to about a regiment in size now, and together combining to form a new Provisional Guards Division. The Guardsmen were just starting to dig in behind that wall, ready for a fight. On their right, the relatively fresh 308th Siberian Division had just arrived from the Factory District. Chuikov decided he could not concede the ground remaining east of the city unfought, and he had nothing else to plug the line. This still left him the 13th Guards at the factories, which he deemed an adequate defense. Even though Volkov's troops had been very static in recent months, there was always a threat at his back.

Immediately north, the 193rd Division had not been engaged by Das Reich, and so it withdrew intact, taking up new defensive positions screening the Barrikady Worker's Settlement, their right flank manned by troops from the tough 10th NKVD Division. Then came the Samara Rifles, a unit that had come all the way from that city, tramping over the Aqueduct bridge, like knights arriving at a beleaguered Castle just as the enemy siege engines were being pulled forward to attack. There were now deploying west of the large bunkers that had been called the Mushrooms, heavy concrete bunkers that had been built during the Volkov wars. Behind them, the 2nd Volga Rifles were finally arriving near Rynok after a three-day march from the Don, and they would be the northernmost defenders, their mission to keep open the one road and access to the Volga itself in that sector.

Now Steiner reassessed his position, seeing that Das Reich was strung out from Orlovka all the way back to Samafalovka on the main rail line. So he ordered the 75th Infantry Division to mop up what was left of enemy resistance and then begin moving north. He would position that division on the northern shoulder opposite the aqueduct defense line, and in so doing, free up Das Reich for the push towards Rynok.

"It was a good day!" he exclaimed, a fist full of division status reports in

hand. “We went through them like they weren’t even there!”

Steiner had seen his Korps perform yet another smashing attack against Chuikov’s outer defense line, with one division after another battering through the line like the successive blows of Thor’s Hammer. Now he was closing on the city, and the battle, that had consumed 1.7 million men in the old history.

He was closing on Thor’s Anvil.

* * *

West of the Don, Eicke’s Division pushed forward against a blocking force put up by the 81st Motor Rifle Division. It had been on the main road to Surovinko, which dipped well south of the River Chir. To his right as planned, the 9th Panzer Division engaged the 3rd Guard Rifle Division, who were suddenly surprised by the ferocity and scale of the German counterattack.

As for Balck, by day’s end he had moved southeast to Verkhne Solonov, consolidating briefly south of State Farm 79. Now he made good his maxim that night marches save blood, intending to swing further east towards the Chir after dark. He had no intention of attacking due north through the neighboring hamlet of Nizhne Solonov. Instead that night march would see his division appear on the enemy’s flank and rear the following morning with a maneuver that was classic Hermann Balck. 5th Guard Rifle Division was going to have uninvited guests for breakfast.

1st Panzergrenadier Battalion of the 111th Regiment reached the road heading north from Nizhne Chirskaya, where one of Hauptmann Paul Hauser’s recon troops had scouted to report what he first thought were Russian troops crossing from the southern bank of the Don. It was soon learned that they were a division of Volkov’s 2nd Orenburg, securing that bridge and town, and the railway bridge to the north as they relieved the Wiking Division. With the flank and rear scouted and secure, Hauser notified Balck by sending a prearranged “Code Blue.”

Fifteen minutes later the attack began, with 4th Panzergrenadier Battalion storming up that road to the height of Hill 528, where they drove off a Soviet flak battery that had been setting up there that morning. From that height, they had a perfect view of the State Farm to the southwest, for now they were

actually behind that position. They quickly radioed in the locations of the three Brigades making up the enemy division. One was near a small balka south of the farm, a second at the edge of the cultivated area, a third on its right at the hamlet of Sysoyevski. The brigade on the balka would be attacked first, and Balck ordered both battalions of his division artillery to pour on the fire.

The Guardsmen fought tenaciously, but eventually gave ground in the face of Balck's armor, retreating north only to find they were already cut off by two more companies of tanks. Driven back to the edge of the State Farm, they were then overrun by III Battalion of the 111th Regiment, the fighting hand to hand amid the bales of hay and broken wood fences of the outer farm. Ahead lay the barren orchard, the leafless trees now in "Stick Season." The German division was now pivoting to engage the second brigade, even while the Russian Division HQ was fleeing madly northwest away from the farm.

By mid-day the 5th Guards had given up this embattled people's Commune, falling back north to make a linkup with the 7th Guards, who were retreating in the face of the attack put in by 9th Panzer Division. On the main road east, Totenkopf was heavily engaged with the 25th Tank Corps, but the Russians still had the 24th and 1st Guard Tank Corps in reserve, both north of the Chir.

Balck came up along the road to Nizhne Chirskaya, finding the man he wanted to speak with again. "Hauser!" he called, seeing his intrepid Captain standing on top of his armored car, his eyes lost in a pair of binoculars. Hauser turned, offering a stiff salute and a wide grin as the General came up.

"What is the situation east on the Chir?"

"I've had men out that way this morning," said Hauser. "There is a small secondary road that runs north to south along the river. About 9 klicks from here, there is a small village—Ostrovskiy. Beyond that town the ground firms up a bit. It's a crossing point you want, correct?"

"You can read my mind," said Balck.

"Well, there's only one thing to deal with. A heavy assault gun regiment is parked in that town. I think they were sent down from Surovinko to block that road. That has to be where that big Guards Armored Corps is—Surovinko. They've been licking their wounds and keeping warm behind this screen of infantry we've been after. Well General, if you want to get over that

river, there is no defense on the east bank, not at the moment. The 11th Rifle Corps pushed past that area yesterday. They are south, the tail end of their column at Bolshe Osinovka.”

“You learned all this this morning?” Balck was impressed.

“Well before breakfast, Herr General.” Hauser smiled.

Balck thought for a moment. “Is the river iced up yet?”

“Not quite. Not thick enough for the vehicles. It would have to be bridged, but the infantry would have no problem.”

Hauser would lead the way that afternoon, bringing up three companies of the 15th Panzer Regiment, and a battalion of Panzergrenadiers. By sunset, the Germans had Ostrovskiy, forcing the Russian Heavy SPGs back towards Kalinovka. During the fighting, Hauser again personally scouted the riverbed, identifying a nice shallow icy spot with a good gravel bottom that might even allow the vehicles to pass over it without much assistance. He notified Balck at sunset.

The plan was discovered by an alert Soviet Guardsman with a rocket battery. He had gone to the river to fetch a bucket of cold water to cool down the barrels of his Katyusha battery, when he saw what looked like German troops near the edge of the river. Hastening back, he reported to his Sergeant, and the word leapt up the chain of command to Surovinko, some 4 kilometers north of his position. There, the 1st Guard Tank had been resupplying, but this alarm, and the duel fought by its SPG regiment at Ostrovskiy, were enough to prompt action. That town was soon to be counterattacked by tanks from the 15th and 16th Guard Tank Brigades, and Hauser was on the radio to Balck reporting that the Russians had moved more tanks directly opposite the section of the river he had selected for the crossing.

“They can read a map,” said Balck, shaking his head. “Very well, Code Yellow. We must see what is happening at Ostrovskiy.”

Chapter 21

Buoyed by his dramatic breakthrough towards Volgograd, Steiner convened a meeting of his key Division commanders to plan the attack. “As you can see,” he said. “Their resistance has broken—even those two Guards divisions they threw at us. Now we must decide how best to carve up the hen. Keppler? What is the situation with Das Reich? Dietrich?”

“We have taken Orlovka,” said Keppler, a bespeckled man of 48 years who had come to the SS after commanding state police units between the wars. “They are falling back to a belt of woodland closer to the city. But that damn aqueduct is going to be a problem. I’ve covered it with flak and AT units, and the pioneers, but I think it will take a little more. This will mean I’ll have only one Panzergrenadier Regiment and the panzers to press any attack in the north.”

“What about 75th Infantry? They should be able to cover that front.”

“It’s a long way for a single division. We haven’t even reached the river in the north yet, and I think we must do so. They are still using roads leading north there, and my recon battalion continues to see more troops arriving. Those roads have to be cut, and when we get to the river, our artillery can stop any further attempt to move in supplies on the water. That said, I would need my whole division to push through.

“Where?”

“Here,” Keppler pointed. “At Rynok. It would mean that Dietrich’s Division would have to position itself to cover my right.”

“Uncle Sepp?” said Steiner, looking at the strong faced Dietrich. His broad nose, prominent dimpled chin and stern aspect were well known anywhere, for Dietrich had been Hitler’s personal bodyguard and chauffeur in the early days. He was a headstrong and willful man, and still so well favored by the Fuhrer, that he often dismissed orders from SS Chief Himmler, a man he thought of as nothing more than a beady eyed administrator. Dietrich was a warrior, through and through, and his solutions to problems often involved violence as a first step, with consideration and planning later.

“We can turn in that direction, but my men are strung out all along that rampart and balka leading to the airfield settlement.”

“You will not need to make a direct assault across those lines,” said Steiner. “Here is what I propose. The Korps will make a general move to the north, with the Brandenburgers aiming their attack at the Kirov Airfield and Barracks. Once taken, that entire rampart is then outflanked, and it will compel the enemy to withdraw. So Dietrich, you need only screen that position, and then throw your weight north on Keppler’s shoulder. I think he is correct. We have not yet entirely isolated the city by shutting that back door, and we must do so before we can really count the guests and sit down to dinner. Do you agree, General Beckermann?” He looked to the tall, aristocratic figure commanding the Brandenburg Division, a unit that should not even exist yet, a joker in time’s deck of fate.

“Agreed,” said Beckermann, a sharp eyed man, blonde haired, with deep blue eyes. “Once we take the airfield, we can then push into this open ground and move toward that big bald hill to the east.”

“Mamayev Kurgan,” said Steiner. “Yes, that will cut the city right in two, and from those heights, we can command the city center. Very well, make that your long term objective. General Hörnlein, as you are on Beckermann’s right, I would then see your division move slightly north to occupy his positions on the Dubovy Ravine. Then begin fighting your way into these outlying segments of the city at Maxim Gorki. Push into this gap here north of Novo Kirovka. It will take you right to the heart of the city itself, right along this balka. With any luck, in a week to ten days we will sit down to a performance in the Gorki Theater overlooking the river, and we’ll parade all the Russian Generals on the stage.” He smiled, but Hörnlein was in no mood for levity.

“I’m afraid it will take more than luck,” he said.

Steiner pivoted to face him. “You have concerns?”

“It will be no easy thing to push into that gap between Novo Kirovka and Volgograd, and even more difficult going when we get to the main built up areas of the city.”

“Don’t worry,” said Steiner quickly. “You will not have to rely on Volkov’s troops to cover the flank any longer. The Wiking Division is coming up from Nizhne Chirskaya.”

“Oh? I thought they were still outside the pocket.”

“Pocket?” Steiner shook his head. “We are not in a pocket, Herr General. That is where the enemy finds himself, particularly after Keppler and Dietrich

complete this planned maneuver. Now then, when Otto Gille brings up my old warhorse, the Wiking Division will cover all of Novo Kirovka. I intend to simply use Volkov's troops to invest Yelshanka and Beketova. This will allow you to attack as I have suggested. Any further concerns?"

Hörnlein inclined his head, taking a deep breath. "I think we must not become overconfident here," he said. "This is a very big city—the size of Moscow in total area, even though it is strung out along the river like a big lamb chop. City fighting is very tough, as we all well know, and a city like this can swallow a division in little time. They might very well fight us in there from one house to the next. The wide frontages our divisions now occupy will compress, because to attack we must concentrate. Casualties will be high. What we need here is more infantry."

"I have one regiment of the 129th in reserve at Kalach," said Steiner, "but beyond that, unless we thin out the lines along the Don, our divisions will have to do the job. Is your division fit for the upcoming battle?"

"The troops have fought hard, but morale is good, and supplies are holding up. The equipment is in reasonable shape as well. Yet realize that all our divisions have been at it since late July. If we were at our nominal strength, I would have far less to consider here, but as it stands, my ranks have been thinned by over thirty percent. I would dare say the same for all the rest here. Mark my words, this will be a very difficult fight, and it will likely take much longer than we anticipate. They fought us like hellcats, delayed our push over that river for six damn weeks. Now they will do the same here."

"Do not be so maudlin, General Hörnlein. Don't forget we still have strong forces west of the Don. They are organizing for a thrust against this enemy spoiling attack, and they will open the road to Kalach in due course. Then we will get our infantry. You will see."

"Then why not wait for that? Why not consolidate now, rest the troops, and forego any major push into the city proper until we do have adequate infantry support?"

"What? And let them continue to reinforce this position?"

"No, we cannot permit that," said Hörnlein. "Dietrich and Keppler should operate as you propose to isolate the city. I believe this was General Manstein's plan from the very first."

"Indeed? Well, it is my plan now," said Steiner gruffly. "Yet you disagree

with the assignments given to Beckermann and yourself?”

“No General, the strategy is sound, it is the execution and timing I question, that is all. Yes, if Beckermann takes the airfield, that rampart position must fall. But I do not think he should then immediately push for Mamayev Kurgan. He should consolidate, and we should convene this meeting again to set the timing of the next phase of operations. As for my division, we can move as you have ordered, wait for the Wikings to make contact on our right, then begin working our way down that ravine. Yet I do not think we can reach the river in a week’s time, or even ten days. That is the heart of the city, and they will fight for it. We should take these initial objectives, then meet again to assess the situation.”

Steiner took a deep breath. “General Beckermann?”

“Once I take that airfield, then I will have the Tsarista Gorge on my right as I push for that big hill. If Hörnlein pushes into that gap as you propose, and moves up that other ravine, that still leaves a great mass of the southern city between our two divisions. Under normal circumstances, and if we both had our full divisions, I would not be concerned. As it stands, perhaps General Hörnlein is correct. We should not move to press for the river in this sector until we assess the situation further. If Manstein breaks through again soon as you suggest, all the better. We will get the infantry we need. But let us take things in stages here.”

“Very well,” said Steiner. “We isolate the city first, with the main effort in the north involving Dietrich and Keppler. Then we’ll see where things stand. Don’t worry, gentlemen. They are as worn out and tired as our men are but it will take three of their soldiers to match one of ours. Of this I have no doubt. Remember, they are not standing outside Berlin. We are here for a reason, and now we will finish the job.”

“Considering that,” said Hörnlein, “How many divisions are we still facing here?”

“We’ve had the Luftwaffe up for a very good look. They have identified at least seven divisions still operating with the 62nd army, and a few ad hoc brigades. In the south, 64th Army has at least five good divisions still on the line, and they are largely unfought. They continue to hold onto Beketova, Yelshanka, and all of Sarpinskiy island, and that is all the more reason for you to push aggressively, General Hörnlein. Get to the river and that entire army is cut off and out of the picture. We can deal with it later.”

“Twelve full divisions, and a few brigades you say.” Hörnlein nodded. “Then it will be very close to the ratio you suggested a moment ago—three to one in their favor. Let us hope our soldiers as every bit as capable as we believe they are.”

“They are very weak on armor,” said Steiner, somewhat irritated. “Don’t forget that. Our tanks will grind them into the rubble.”

“Of that I have little doubt,” said Hörnlein. “It’s what might be under that rubble that concerns me—in the cellars. I cannot take my tanks into the sewers. That’s work for infantry. So let us hope that Manstein moves as expeditiously as you suggest. We will need that infantry, and sooner than we may think.”

* * *

What Steiner did not know was the real strength and composition of the forces waiting for him in Volgograd. He had assumed that these divisions would be every bit as fragile as those he had just destroyed, but in fact, their ranks were swelled by all the remnants and stragglers that made their way back to the city. Instead of trying to reconstitute those lost divisions, the remains of 45th, 95th and 112th Rifle Divisions were simply folded into the ranks of Chuikov’s remaining formations to bring them up to strength.

Nor did Steiner know the character and caliber of the men he would be facing. The long grinding fight to get where he was, partly by his own will, and partly because he had been chased out of his HQ in Surovinko, should have given him a measure of Hörnlein’s caution, but he still seemed heedless. The Samara Rifles had stood a long watch over the bend in the Volga against Volkov’s many attempts to secure that place. Now, with action on that front subsiding, it had come by rail to take up a defensive position west of Rynok and Spartanovka, and it was going to be very tough that day. On its right, the crack 2nd Volga Rifles were now taking up positions, and on their left the stalwart 10th NKVD Brigade was moving up, making the defense of that vital sector as secure as any place in Chuikov’s front.

Chuikov had only just arrived at his new headquarters, a secure chamber inside the Red October Factory. His wild dark hair was disheveled, and his cheeks sagged with the signs of the strain of these recent weeks, but his eyes were still bright and active beneath his gnarled forehead and those heavy

brows. He was wondering what had become of Shumilov, for he had not phoned in to report the location of his new headquarters since their previous conversation. Then, to his great surprise, in walked Shumilov with a single staffer at his side. A heavy set man, built like a russet potato, Shumilov pulled off the wool cap that kept the snow from his balding head.

“Cold night,” he said simply. “But everyone moved as planned. I thought I would come find you directly, as we must make a difficult decision concerning Beketova.”

“Come in,” said Chuikov with a smile. “Warm yourself. The staff is just getting things set up again.” He gestured to a chair by an old worn table lit by a single oil lamp. “As to Beketova, it has been on my mind as well. Did you leave two divisions there?”

“Just one, the 1st Siberian.” That was the old 29th Rifle Division, raised from veterans of the fighting near Omsk by Karpov’s Siberians. He had sent it east some time ago, and Zhukov posted it here as the 29th Division. But being one of the first Siberian divisions to arrive, the Soviets had taken to calling it the 1st Siberian.

“They are good men,” said Shumilov, “and I could leave them there as you wish, but I question the benefit to our defense here. By holding onto Beketova, it forces me to extend my lines well south. Now it looks like the Germans brought up that other SS Division that withdrew over the Don at Nizhne Chirskaya and Tormosin. It is already probing at Yelshanka and Kupersnoye. If they push through, everything to the south will be cut off.”

“But what about Sarpinskiy Island?” said Chuikov. That was the key, for the main ferry at Beketova offered an easy crossing point to the big marshy island south of Volgograd. The Soviets had been holding it for years, and still had troops amounting to two divisions there as a garrison.

“What about it?” said Shumilov. “Do you think Volkov wants it? He hasn’t tried our positions there for over a year. If you want my opinion, and you do, I think we should fall back to Yelshanka. Then I can take the 1st Siberians out of Beketova, and the 185th out of Kupersnoye, and those troops would make a good strong reserve for the real fight here at Volgograd. On Sarpinskiy Island, we can hold on to the ferry sites across from the 25th of October Lumber Trust. That area is well fortified, and with it, we still hold the trunk of the island. As for the elephant, I cannot see any purpose in holding it. We certainly can’t retreat there, and the ground is too bad for

Volkov to drag his artillery over. If he wants it, let him come.”

“Yet that is a lot of territory to yield without a fight.”

“Just fat on the steak,” said Shumilov. “We waste three divisions trying to hold it with Beketova, and having those troops in Volgograd gives us much more depth and resilience there. All the Germans will do is turn Beketova over to Volkov’s troops, and then, after we beat the Germans, we can run Volkov out of the place any time we choose.”

Chuikov ran a hand through that dark mane of hair, the lion’s mane as his staffers called it. “Alright,” he said leaning over the map. “Pull the 1st Siberian out. Send the headquarters and all the artillery by the coast road and rail line through Kupersnoye. Anything left can take the ferry by river and land at the Lumber Trust. When that movement is complete, then fold back the 185th Division to hold Yelshanka. The troops we have in eastern Sarpinskiy can go by the coast road through Peschanyy to the inner fortified zone near the river. There is already fighting outside Yelshanka. Let us hope this redeployment can finish before we lose it.”

“I will see to it personally. My new headquarters will be in the sawmills of the Lumber Trust. If not there, then the Cannery building. This move will pay us good dividends,” he smiled. “And the Germans will do the paying.”

“Do one thing more,” said Chuikov. “After we have pulled out the last of the rafts and gunboats, open the taps on the oil tank farm near Beketova. Let it flow right into the river, and then set it all aflame. That will stop any enemy movement on the river for some time, and cover your withdrawal.”

Shumilov smiled. “There will be fire on the Volga tonight,” he said, and with a stiff salute, he strode off to see to his business. Later when he saw that river burning, he passed a moment thinking of this brief reprieve, when the fires of war were held at bay by the fires of nature. Yet the longer he watched the red sky over the water, the deeper came the feeling of isolation and quiet fear, like a man who had set his own house on fire to save it from brigands and buglers suddenly realizing he was still trapped inside.

Part VIII

Red October

“We will not surrender our native city, our native home, our native land. We will fill every street in the city with impassable barricades. We will make every house, every block, every street into an impregnable fortress!”

— Communist Party Declaration: *City of Volgograd*

Chapter 22

Battle for the Graveyards

In spite of his reservations, Hörnlein was quick to mount a vigorous attack into the wide gap between Novo Kirovka and the main city. On his right, stretching along the northern suburbs of Novo Kirovka was the main cemetery of the city, stretching some three kilometers east, where it approached a sturdy building that was a Brick Factory near the balka. That feature ran another four kilometers east before several branches joined it from the north, where there was yet another burial ground near the main city hospital. The main road from Kalach ran in towards central Volgograd, past a radio station, yet another cemetery, and then running by that hospital.

As Grossdeutschland Division pushed into that open ground, Hörnlein was haunted by the thought that his men were advancing into a position bounded by the resting places of the dead, and he worried that too many of his fine young soldiers might soon join them. It was a sallow grey morning, with light snow falling, and his first order of business would be to capture and silence that Radio Station. It had been broadcasting ceaselessly, taunting the Germans, the announcer saying there was plenty of room in the cemeteries for newcomers, and plenty of stone in the dry balkas for new headstones.

“If that man is captured alive,” said Hörnlein, “then I will personally see that he gets a nice plot in that cemetery.”

That morning, 1st Company of his Fusilier Regiment, with 1 Panzer Company made a direct attack on the station, the tanks blasting away at the walls, doors, and windows, the infantry making well-coordinated rushes to break in to the lower floor. It was half an hour’s work, and Hörnlein had the satisfaction of having the announcer dragged back alive through German lines and presented to him, whereupon he took out his pistol and aimed it directly at the man’s head.

“Plenty of room in the cemeteries?” he said. “Then there will certainly be room for you!” He had no scruples when he pulled the trigger, and his men smirked as they dragged the man’s limp body off, though he was not given

the dignity of a burial. They left him for the bands of roving dogs. It was just the opening line of the litany of terror and cruelty that this battle would become.

2nd Fusilier Company was already in the center of the Radio Station Cemetery, and now it was supported with a major attack involving two more companies of Panzergrenadiers and a lot of armor. That attack cleared the ground there by mid-day, the defending 204th Rifle Division out-fought among the tombstones. After they had fallen back into the suburbs further east, the Russian division artillery put in a barrage with all three battalions.

It was a macabre site to see the artillery churning up the cemetery, the headstones shattering, sodden earth cratered deep enough in places to expose the bleached white skeletons of the buried. To one German Grenadier, it seemed as if the dead were rising up from their graves to join the battle. Sergeant Muller dove for cover into a smoking shell crater, thinking it unlikely that a second shell would land at just that spot. There he found a horror of another kind as he crouched low, the moldered remnants of a newly buried corpse, the skin of its face rotted away, the pallid skull exposed, and those empty eye sockets staring at him. It was an experience that would haunt him ever after.

The Germans took the smaller cemetery that day, but did not go into the much larger burial ground on the northern fringes of Novo Kirovka. First they focused on the small Brick Factory, jutting like Hougomont from the edge of the balka that bordered the city. Two companies of the tough Grenadiers drove out 1st Battalion, 38th Rifle Division, and the Russians retreated into the balka. Behind them came the growl of tanks, and the men of the motorized machinegun company attached to that battalion radioed back to say they had what looked to be two battalions of enemy tanks in the balka. Hörnlein's men were in the thick of that no-man's land, surrounded by the dead on three sides, and now confronting a most unexpected attack by this armor.

When Chuikov had learned that the Germans were moving aggressively into that gap, he had quickly ordered the 56th Tank Brigade to counterattack. The armor poured over the balka, grinding towards that MG Company, which found itself ill prepared to contest that ground. A radio call went out, sounding the alarm, which was heard by 7th and 8th Panzer Companies west of the Brick Factory. They had been preparing to go into the big cemetery,

but now they pulled out of that sector, moving over the balka to support the threatened area. They would bring over 30 tanks, and about half were the newer PzKfw Vs, with two Lions and also a pair of the new Tigers. These were beasts that had never prowled the broken landscape of this city, all appearing in the war six months early.

The Russians had learned to fear and respect the Tiger when it appeared. It outgunned their own tanks, with far more hitting power at range, and during the war in Fedorov's history, it achieved a kill ratio of 8 to 1 over all Russian adversaries it faced. It was to be an equally lopsided duel here, with the more experienced German tank crews halting their advance just outside 700 meters, and then letting the long barreled Panthers and Tigers cherry pick the onrushing enemy tanks. One of the Tigers scored a particularly spectacular hit, blowing the turret right off a T-34, the tank crews hooting when they saw it spin madly up from the hull on a column of black smoke and fire.

Hörnlein had taken all his key objectives by the end of the following day. He had men in the main cemetery, where fighting still continued at the extreme east, and on the opposite western neck of the graveyard, where a cluster of larger mausoleums stood like ghostly pill boxes manned by both the living and the dead. As squads of German infantry pushed forward, if any fell dead from enemy fire, they would soon be attended by a small penal squad.

These unlucky soldiers, having run afoul of regulations or fallen out of favor with their Sergeants for one reason or another, would be assigned to crawl forward over the cold snowy graves, and literally dig into the frozen earth then and there, all under enemy fire. Their mission was to bury the dead where they fell, and they were to bring back all the personal effects of the fallen, their helmet, belt, sidearm and any medals or other documents.

Heintz Romer was one such private, finding himself in the penal squad that day for pilfering an officer's personal stash of tobacco. He had dragged himself over the deadly ground, through a ghastly scene where tracer rounds zipped past his exposed head. No helmets were issued to the men on that squad, so as to motivate them to get out to their fallen grenadiers, where it was permitted that they could then wear the helmet of the stricken soldier.

Fighting for a damn graveyard, he thought, bemoaning his fate. Damn bullets snapping off the tombstones, the ground frozen over and cold as hell

on my belly, and another twenty yards to that Grenadier out there.

Then came the reassuring drone of an MG-42, and he saw the enemy line ahead enveloped in that hail of bullets. Covering fire! On an impulse, he reasoned that ten seconds on his booted feet would get him much farther than ten minutes on his belly, so he grunted up into a low crouch, running from one headstone to the next. Behind him, he heard the cheering of the other members of the penal squad, but they all had ulterior motives. If Heintz were to be gunned down, then it would be one of the remaining five men out there on his belly in the middle of that boneyard.

Private Romer made it to the fallen man, hugging the ground behind his body, the cold reaching right through his trenchcoat. First things first. He began to search through the man's pockets, pulling out anything he could find. At one point, a rifle bullet nearly struck his hand, thudding into the fallen soldier instead.

"Nice of you to take a bullet for me," he said aloud, "seeing all the trouble I've been put to here." He looked at the man's personal billfold, seeing his name on an identity card—Klingmann, Private First Class—and behind the card he found a photograph, presumably of the man's wife, and two small children. He passed a moment of sadness, thinking of them being out there, far away, at that very moment, and not knowing that Private Klingmann had already joined the dark, silent battalion of the dead buried beneath that ghastly ground. They were to be his family now, and the only embrace he would ever have again would be the mingling of his corpse, his bones, with those of the enemy he had come here to conquer. He was joining them soon, as Heintz stuffed the billfold away in a pocket and closed his frigid fingers on the haft of his shovel. His back protected by a thick headstone, he began to scrape at the cold earth, his breath frosty white, deathly white with the exertion of his labor.

The Germans were going to take that burial ground that day, but they were going to have to pay for it with the lives of men like Private Klingmann, and the madness that would soon fall on men like Private Heintz Romer, digging as he stared at the frozen blood of his fellow soldier, a macabre sheen of red ice darkening the area around the man's body.

Yet if the camera pulled back from this silent little drama in the cemetery, it would have seen that Steiner's plan was working as he supposed it might. The considerable weight of the Grossdeutschland Division was now firmly

within the gap between Novo Kirovka and the town of Maxim Gorki, north beyond the captured Radio Station. The stalwart Grenadiers and Fusiliers were in all three cemeteries, and had the small Brick Factory set up as an observation post for their mortars. The wedge they had secured was very dangerous to the defense, for the easternmost cemetery by the hospital was no more than six kilometers from the river.

The Brandenburgers to their north had also hit hard, enfilading Maxim Gorki from that side, where an entire regiment of the 204th Rifle Division was now cut off. That division had also stormed the Kirov Airfield, and taken the steelworks beyond the barracks, but the Soviet 196th Rifle Division was still firmly entrenched in that old military base, fighting from behind the stockade wall, and low wood barracks buildings that made up the place. The loss of the airfield, however, forced the Russian Guardsmen on the Rampart to abandon that position as Steiner predicted. They fell back into the slowly thickening trees that crept up the western slope of Hill 115.

To make matters worse for the Russians, the Leibstandarte Division was pushing hard near the Airfield Settlement at the northern end of that rampart. The division had been pushing up the rail line that crossed the Don near Golubinskaya and ran down through Gorodische and Aleksandrovka, eventually running on to the Flight School near Mamayev Kurgan. Chuikov could see what was happening, a classic pincer attack by two of the steely German divisions against his center. The question was whether or not he should attempt to hold, or fall back. There was so little ground to give, and the 12 kilometers from the big mass of Mamayev to the rampart seemed like an endless luxury of space which he did not wish to relinquish unfought.

Yet the fighting had already pulled in a good number of reserve units, and now he had only a single Machinegun Regiment and the 189th Tank Battalion parked along the rail line by the Flying School. The 124th Special Brigade was in the Red October Worker's Settlement, but they had limited offensive value, being lightly armed civilian recruits. He also had the entire 13th Guards Rifle Division back in the factories, but he would not touch it, not now, not on the first days of what might be many weeks of hard fighting here. So he sent one battalion from the MG Regiment north to shore up the Airfield Settlement, and a second battalion to the airfield itself, which was now being overrun by German infantry from the Brandenburg Division.

The Rampart, as perfect an anti-tank ditch as anywhere else on the

battlefield, had fallen with scarcely a shot being fired. The telephone rang in his underground HQ bunker, the quavering of the sound jarring his nerves. He reached for it, expecting nothing but bad news, and Shumilov did not disappoint.

It's that damn SS division I told you about—the one that has come up from Nizhne Chirskaya. How did Rokossovsky's boys ever compel them to withdraw? They hit the Minina Mining Workers Settlement hard today, and have nearly overrun the entire sector."

"What about Beketova?" said Chuikov. "What about the Siberian Division?"

"I pulled it out safely, but just barely. Volkov has that city now, all but the ferry bunker, where I left a single battalion to hold out for a while. We're placing charges on all the quays and boat docks. No sense making things easy for Volkov's brats when they smell the river."

"Then where is the rest of the 1st Siberian?"

"All the heavy weapons went by the coast road through Kupersnoye as we planned. There was a traffic snarl over the railway bridge at the Leopard Gorge. The damn Germans are no more than two kilometers west of that bridge! That said, I got it sorted out, and most of the infantry came up on the river barges to the Lumber Trust Ferry, and we're damn lucky they are there. If that SS division keeps on coming like they have these last two days, they'll be in Yelshanka tomorrow."

"What about your 185th Division? It was holding west of Yelshanka, yes?"

"Not for very much longer. Those SS troopers fight like demons. They busted up that division very badly. My men are still fighting—we hold the Yelshanka Quarry, a small section of the Minina Settlement, the local hospital. But they've already taken Verknaya Yelshanka, and soon they'll push right on through Kupersnoye to the river. Thankfully, the evacuation of Sarpinskiy Island is coming off smoothly. Volkov hasn't lifted a finger east of the Volga. They're just sitting over there gloating and listening to the artillery fire."

"It's a lot of ground to give, more than all we still hold." Chuikov was still worried about the decision.

"True Vasyli, but we pulled three more divisions into the fight for Volgograd. Sergei Kirov won't want to know what happened on Sarpinskiy

Island. It's this city he's concerned about."

"They made a big push into the gap between Novo Kirovka and Maxim Gorki," said Chuikov. "It looks like they are trying to carve up the city like a steak—create smaller enclaves that they can invest and reduce one by one. It's what I would do."

"Is it?" said Shumilov. "Then start thinking of how we can stop them."

"Stop them? General Shumilov, that won't take much thinking, but it will take a good deal of muscle, bone, and blood. Their offensive push is slowing a bit tonight, but they'll be back at it again tomorrow. The only place that held firm today is the northern segment. They sent the Das Reich Division near the aqueduct east towards Rynok. Rokossovsky was kind enough to return our 2nd Volga Rifles, and he even fleshed it out with a good many new squads. They are holding the line beyond the Mushrooms."

"Good," said Shumilov, then he was silent for a moment. "To think that division was once a corps, and it stood watch here for ten years. Volkov could never move them, and now the wolves are at the gates. God be with them."

"With us all," said Chuikov. "The death toll from the enemy bombing is fierce. Thousands died again today, and we have no way to evacuate the civilians."

"Then let them stay and fight," said Shumilov. "We're going to need every man, woman and child that can lift a finger."

See Map: "Action in the South" at www.writingshop.ws

Chapter 23

Operation Saturn

Volgograd was, after all, a city where people lived. Though the advancing German troops had seen tens of thousands evacuate before the battle, there were still too many to be consumed by Richthoven's rain of bombs. But the bombing wasn't as severe here as it had been in Fedorov's history. The German 8th Air Corps was matched by a growing Soviet presence in the sky, a fact that darkened Steiner's thinking like a shadow over his right shoulder when he would stare down at the city map.

In spite of the initial breakthrough, particularly in the south where his old Wiking Division proved to be a whirlwind of fighting, Das Reich had not yet reached Rynok, so the Russians were still getting in much needed supplies along that road, and over the river at night. Now, on the third day of his opening offensive, Steiner was already beginning to receive reports from artillery battalions attached to his five elite divisions, all requesting more ammunition.

Ammunition... That was his real problem. The loss of Surovinko was beginning to matter now, for no trucks had reached him since his hasty retreat to this place. He had only those supplies he had trucked in from the forward depots at Oblivskaya and Surovinko, and no way of knowing how long that supply route would be closed. Volkov used guns of a completely different caliber, 76 and 100, 152 and 203mm shells. The Germans used 75, 105, 150 and 210mm. Volkov made no bullets that would fit into the new German MG-42 machinegun. He had no Panzerfausts to send, and no replacement ammo for any of the panzers.

All that had to come by air now. The route that was open through Tormosin provided a small bridge near the confluence of the Askay River with the Don, and some supplies were getting in that way from the depot at Chern, a roundabout journey of over 200 kilometers one way. Steiner was gambling now, thinking that if he threw the full wrath and ire of his crack SS Panzer Korps at the city, he could storm it before the defense there could calcify. For any long battle here, he needed that supply route through Kalach

open again, and then he needed that rail line restored to the bridge at Nizhne Chirskaya. So every moment now was like a candle burning for him. Each day of fighting was going to bring him that much closer to a point of depletion, and the flights of bothersome Shturmovik overhead weighed heavily on him. If the Luftwaffe could not make regular deliveries....

So much depended on events west of the Don, where Manstein had officially christened his offensive counterattack towards Kalach as Operation *Wintergewitter*—Winter Storm. It came as the first snows of an early winter had fallen, freezing the shallow streams that laced through the rolling landscape. His attack had been led by Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division, which had swept around the right, falling on State Farm 79 like that winter storm, and driving back the ill-prepared 5th Guards Rifle Division. On his left, 9th Panzer had broken through the lines of 7th Guards, and the full weight of the division was pouring through. Now the Soviet defense astride the road to Surovinko was completely flanked, and by mid-day on October 23rd, elements of both German Panzer Divisions were within three to five kilometers of Surovinko.

Yet there sat a great spider, the 1st Guards Tank Corps that had been refueling and rearming all this time. It had responded sluggishly to the crisis, not realizing the gravity of the situation. Then, one by one, it began dispatching units to shore up threatened sectors. The Motor Rifle Brigade deployed astride the main road, and several tank brigades crossed the Chir only to run directly into that winter storm.

9th and 11th Panzer Divisions had effectively pinched off and encircled the Guards Rifle Corps, catching many of the Soviet brigades out in the open, advancing, and not in any prepared defensive positions. Units that might have been very difficult to move if properly deployed were instead steam rolled by the fast moving German panzer units, the infantry following in halftracks right on their heels. It was a lightning swift blitzkrieg attack by two full panzer divisions, and it broke through all the way to the banks of the Chir a kilometer south of Surovinko.

At the same time, the Totenkopf Division was grinding up the main road on a concentrated front, and it had both the Schwerepanzer Battalions in the attack. It had smashed the 81st Motor Rifle Division, and now it was systematically destroying 25th Tank Corps. Just as it seemed the newly designated 5th Tank Army was about to deliver the coup de grace by

enveloping Oblivskaya, Manstein and his able Lieutenants had delivered yet another stunning counterblow, like a fighter leaning on the ropes suddenly landing a flurry of punches. Hermann Balck was the stinging jab, 9th Panzer the right cross, and Totenkopf the thundering uppercut. 5th Tank Army was staggered, driven back, and now on very unsteady legs.

The bewildered commander of that army, General Romanenko, had but one last reserve intact, the 24th Tank Corps. It had been positioned along the main rail line, which ran north of the Chir into Surovinko. While his 2nd Guard Rifle Corps had been shattered by this sudden unexpected attack, he still had the three divisions of the 3rd Guard Rifle Corps to the right of 24th Tank Corps, facing off against the newly arrived German 3rd Motorized Division that had relieved 3rd SS to enable their participation in the German offensive. He considered launching 24th Tank Corps in an attack right over the Chir, aimed at cutting the main road and stopping 3rd SS, but that would only put his last mobile reserve in the bag. The Germans were already fighting at the southern fringes of Surovinko!

Romanenko passed his problem up the line to Rokossovsky, who had now been given overall local command of Soviet forces west of the Don. He looked at the map and selected the simplest solution—do nothing. Leave the 24th Tank Corps right where it was, but deploy it north of the Chir on defense, and send anything left over to help defend Surovinko. The offensive in that area was involuntarily suspended, and the Chir River itself would now become the new defensive front line. The 9th Rifle Corps that had been deploying towards Nizhne Chirskaya was to pull back so as to establish contact with Surovinko.

The decision boldly highlighted the differing capabilities of each side at that time. Rokossovsky knew that if assembled in mass as they had been at the outset, well supplied and fueled, Zhukov's Shock Armies could bull their way through the German defense to deliver this first stunning victory and cut the main supply line Steiner needed. The question now was whether they could keep that line shut tight.

While the German reaction had been to circle and dance with those hard hitting Panzer Divisions, Rokossovsky knew that Romanenko's tankers could not fight a battle of maneuver now, not at the end of their long offensive drive, even while the Tank Corps had been trying to get fuel and ammunition. The best they could do would be to try and hold the line of the Chir. His real

response to Winter Storm would have to be Operation Saturn, which was only now beginning to move into the early stages as the 1st Tank Army and 5th Shock Group began to move forward to their assigned jumping off points.

The offensive began by first taking all the units on the line and easing them forward into closer contact with the German front. Desultory mortar and artillery fire began to come in, aimed at pinning down the German infantry divisions, sending their riflemen into their trenches and revetments. The Germans responded by forming up the newly arrived 23rd Panzer Division, and repositioning a few battalions to shore up their line. 24th Panzer Division had already been placed on the line at the seam between the 2nd and 3rd Shock Armies, and this deployment allowed the 336th Infantry to be pulled off that line into reserve. It was already in road march column, approaching Chern on the main road where it had been ordered to begin moving towards Surovinko to bolster the push there. The division was eventually slated to cross the Don to support Steiner, but now that was by no means a certain prospect.

The front dipped closest to Morozovsk in the 3rd Shock Army sector, and that force put in a strong attack, committing all its mobile reserves in fast moving cavalry units. The ski brigades would also get their first chance to wax the boards and speed off over the light snowpack from the recent storm. 60th Light Tank Brigade found a hole open in the lines of the German 305th Infantry Division and raced on through, gaining ten kilometers and reaching the main road from Morozovsk to Chern.

That got Manstein's attention immediately. He had already thinned out his cupboard, sending the three Reserve Don Group infantry battalions up to the front to facilitate the withdrawal of 336th Infantry. Now, with an enemy tank unit just six kilometers from his desk in Morozovsk, the 336th was immediately ordered to halt its eastward march, turn about, and come west along the main road.

Its 686th Regiment had been at the tail of the column, and now it quickly became the vanguard, the trucks racing west on the road to the crisis point. The division would assemble at a road mark known as Kilometer 161 on their maps, and deploy to push back the penetration the enemy had achieved here. Better motorized, the swift moving Motorcycle Recon Battalion raced ahead, following the rail line south of the main road to reach Morozovsk late on the 25th of October. They soon ran into Soviet cavalry and armored cars, but this

had been designed as no more than a spoiling attack, meant to draw in any mobile reserves the Germans might have waiting behind the front. The real offensive was much farther west, but it was taking time to get underway.

The sometimes ponderous nature of Soviet operations at this stage was slowing Saturn down, but it eventually built up like too much snow on the roof of the German line. Now that roof began to collapse. The weight of the entire 5th Shock Army was soon falling on the 24th Panzer Division. II Battalion of 21st Panzergrenadier Regiment was simply overrun and destroyed, with III Battalion surrounded. Volsky's big 4th Mech Corps had joined this attack, like a bear coming out of hibernation. And now the 1st Tank Army was reaching the scene in force, the landscape suddenly alive with the grind and growl of tanks again on every quarter. They were through the gap in the German ranks, trundling south.

The German 23rd Panzer had jogged right to come up on the flank of the beleaguered 24th, and its lines were reasonably secure and well organized. It was holding on the left, but the weight of 5th Shock Army, Volsky's Mech Corps and all the tanks of 7th and 10th Tank Corps were simply too much on the right. 24th Panzer Division was being overrun. The Recon Battalion and four of the six Panzergrenadier Battalions were all but destroyed, the artillery park fleeing south in a mad chaotic rush. Lengsfeld's 23rd tried to counterattack on the shoulder of the enemy penetration, but it felt like they were trying to force a hatch shut against a flood of onrushing seawater on a sinking ship.

Meanwhile, off to the east, Winter Storm continued to rage against 5th Tank Army. The 3rd SS had swung north off the main road and pushed right over the Chir against 24th Tank Corps, and now, relieved by elements of 3rd Motorized, the Reichsführer Brigade that had been defending near Oblivskaya swung right up the road to the east, and plowed into Surovinko. That was just the added wind in the storm that was needed, allowing Scheller's 9th Panzer Division to drive the remnants of 1st Tank Corps out of the town. Meanwhile, Balck found Hauser by the river, still screening that site he had chosen for a good crossing point.

"The tanks have pulled out," said Hauser. "Now the far bank is only screened by infantry."

"Then it looks like we should try them here," Balck decided. There was no other flanking move possible for his division. His right flank was just the

increasingly marshy banks of the Chir as it wound down towards the Don. Now it was time to take 11th Panzer over that river, but half his division was very low on supplies. So he attacked with the other half.

Two hours later, Manstein got the report that Balck was over the Chir with a strong Kampfgruppe, ready to join the units of 9th Panzer. Thus far, Winter Storm had met his every expectation, a complete success in smashing 5th Tank Army and throwing its shattered tank corps back in considerable disarray. Yet it was still well over 40 kilometers to Kalach. The fight there had worn down his divisions, supply was needed, and he knew that the storm must soon abate.

Beyond that, the reports coming in from 14th Panzer Korps were most disturbing. The Russians had produced yet another fresh reserve army to throw at him, and Manstein could not understand how they were doing it. The 336th had stopped the penetration north of Morozovsk, but now, with the collapse of 24th Panzer, a new and more serious threat was developing from the northwest. He was going to have to pull his entire left wing back, trading space for time. Orders were sent that hour for the two Luftwaffe Field Divisions to withdraw with the 294th Infantry. Manstein wanted infantry to reform a defensive front so he could pull 23rd Panzer out of the storm and get some mobile reserve in hand again.

In a strange flip on either side of the map, the Germans had finished off the Soviet 24th Tank Corps, and they now had Surovinko back in the east. Yet the Soviets had nearly destroyed 24th Panzer Division, and they were coming for Morozovsk in the west. Manstein had laid down a nice flush, in spades, but Rokossovsky had a full house, Jacks and Queens high.

See Map: General Situation, Oct 30, 1942 at www.Writingshop.ws

Chapter 24

Steiner had been pacing in his headquarters, eager to get on with the demolition of this city. It would complete his mission for the whole of Operation Blue, match Rundstedt's accomplishment in investing Voronezh, justify his decision to pull 54th Korps east of the Don. After all, that was the direction they had been pushing. It wasn't a retreat, he kept telling himself, but an advance on the primary objective with as much strength as he could get his hands on. He overlooked the fact that he was handing all the ground between Surovinko and Kalach to the Russians. Manstein was still out there, with his miracle workers like Hermann Balck and the others. They would get through in short order.

His old Wiking Division had broken through in the south, and this after fighting at Golubinskaya, then force marching to Surovinko and holding there. Now he was glad he gave the order for his Norsemen to pull back to Nizhne Chirskaya. They are truly Thor's Hammer, he thought, and he was using them to pound away at the anvil of this city, crumbling its stone buildings further with every blow.

We've run them out of Beketova and Kupersnoye; pushed them back to Yelshanka. All in a day's work for my iron men of the north. But I think the troops they had in Beketova went somewhere, did they not? The south may get more difficult, but if it comes to a race between the Wikings and Das Reich to see who can get to the Volga first, my money is on the fighting 5th. I have had to add the Korps Stug Battalions and Sturmpanzer to the attack in the north. There are some very tough Russian divisions up there, and Das Reich is fighting with only one good arm.

Infantry... I grabbed all I could get my hands on, but it is never enough. If I had another regiment or two, then Das Reich could pull its Grenadiers off the aqueduct line. Should I send for that reserve regiment at Kalach? That would be a very long march. The fighting is already five or six kilometers from Rynok. It would most likely be over before those troops even arrived.

In the center, both Hörnlein and Beckermann are sitting on most of their initial objectives. Only the old military base near the airfield remains in enemy hands. I'm counting on those two divisions to push right on through to

Central Volgograd.

That same day Steiner's bet paid off when the Wikings seized the railroad bridge over the gorge at Kupersnoye, then the Motorcycle Recon Company of the Nordland Regiment pushed on east, reaching the Volga at 11:00 hours on the 24th of October, just a day before the traditional celebration of the October Revolution. Steiner was very gratified by the news, telling the quartermaster that he was to fish out some special rations from the Korps stockpiles and have them trucked to that recon battalion, along with a commendation and his own personal thanks.

Yet the north remained stubbornly impervious, until the Sturmpioneers he had attached to beef up Das Reich launched a concerted attack on the morning of the 25th. Heavily supported by the two Korps Stug battalions, and 6th Company from the Das Reich Panzer Regiment, their assault carried the into the first of the heavy concrete Mushrooms east of Rynok. Yet the Russians counterattacked immediately, their officers screaming "Red October!" As they led their men in, retaking that bunker on its northern segment. Enemy artillery fire rained down as the Russians sent in their own engineer battalion from 2nd Volga Rifles to shore up that segment of the line. On this day, the anniversary of the Revolution put additional steel into the backbones of every Soviet soldier who was engaged.

But every day ends....

On the morning of the 26th Steiner got a most encouraging report. Manstein had dispatched two long truck columns with ammunition and spare parts from the depot at Chern two days ago. They had gone down through Tormosin, over the bridge there, and the leading column was now arriving at Martinovka.

"Excellent," he said. "Then I can be a bit less stingy with what we now have on hand. Order the quartermasters to distribute what remains in the depots here. When the divisions top off, then we'll renew this offensive."

He wanted to time everything to jump off the morning of the 27th, and so all that day and night, the trucks would be moving. "Division commanders should begin positioning their shock groups at once," he ordered. "Get hold of General Gille with the Wiking Division. I want him to make his main thrust here, up the dry riverbed of the Yelshanka river. He should position accordingly."

That was the sector occupied by the Germania Regiment, and that night,

the Wiking division shifted all the recon battalion, armored cars, the mobile Panzerjager companies, and the pioneers to that Regiment. In addition, Volkov's troops came up along the line of the Leopard Gorge, just north of Kupersnoye. They would now man that position, relieving the Nordland regiment so it could begin organizing a second strong kampfguppe behind Germana.

Hörnlein got the next call, for he had only just cleared the last and easternmost cemetery on yet another winding balka that ran right down through central Volgograd.

"I want you to organize a strong group to push down that balka," said Steiner.

"But we haven't taken the Hospital yet," said Hörnlein. "It's a sturdy concrete building, and they are fighting us from one ward to another. Then, just when we think we have a section cleared, they come up from the cellar beneath and reoccupy rooms behind our assault teams! I warned you the fighting would get complicated like this."

"Just break through," said Steiner. "I'll get you all the ammunition you need. Drive for the Gorki Theater."

"Still contemplating a show with the Russian Generals?" said Hörnlein with just an edge of sarcasm. "Very well, but you haven't seen the ground here. It's a web of many balkas, with three branches all running north from that channel. We should attack to one side or another—not down the main balka. It still has water in it, and the ice is very thin. If I attack on the north side, I'll have the damn hospital at my back. Better on the south side."

"North, south, east or west," said Steiner. "I want you in that theater as soon as you can get there. We'll pocket the entire southern half of the city—all of Novo Kirovka."

"With respect, Herr General, the entire city is already one big pocket. That won't matter. They will still fight. There's at least four full Rifle Divisions in that sector, and three or four brigades. That's the entire 64th Army. Do you think we can reduce such a pocket with two divisions? My attack will also just dig a deeper hole into the city, and I'll have to defend both flanks as I advance. I tell you we need infantry! You are in too big a hurry here. What is happening west of the Don?"

"Manstein has retaken Surovinko." There was a brief silence on the telephone.

“Well that is good news,” said Hörnlein at last. “How soon before he reaches Kalach? We’ll need supplies soon.”

“A truck column arrived this morning. That’s what this push is all about.”

“I see... Well general, I would advise you to leave some bread in the pantry, but I will do what I can here to see you don’t waste your ticket to the theater.”

Just before dusk on the 26th, Steiner got yet another unexpected surprise. The Luftwaffe made a big delivery to Gumrak airfield, not with crates of ammunition this time, but with the transports crammed with fresh replacements. He rubbed his hands together, both to chase the cold and express his delight. Then ordered the men onto trucks and began sending them off to the selected points where his division commanders were now concentrating for the attack the following morning.

That night the Brandenburgers sent their entire assault pioneer battalion to Hörnlein, and said they had orders from Steiner to take the hospital the general had complained about. Hörnlein kicked in two companies of Grenadiers and another Panzerpioneer company. The battle there was furious, with demolition squads blowing holes in the walls, the engineers slithering through them like black lizards, the flame thrower teams blasting into a room, literally consuming the oxygen inside before the attack.

Eighty percent of the defenders were slain, but as dawn came, 3rd Machinegun company of the 204th Rifle Division was still in the hospital on the upper floors, down to the last few belts of ammunition, and taking to relying on a handful of grenades to stop the pioneer assault teams. When the Germans would hear the grenades rattling down from above, they would all dive for cover. So the Russians simply started throwing chunks of stone down, or even their empty canteens filled with sand, to achieve a similar effect, until the Germans caught on. The only hitch was that they would never know whether the next clattering sound would be a grenade, a canteen, or merely a rock. Guessing wrong could quickly be fatal.

Sensing something was up near that hospital, the Russians shelled the cemetery again that night, but most of the German squads had already moved forward and down into the last balka which was their jumping off point. The late barrage arced over their heads to fall among the dead. For many, and certainly for unlucky men like Private Heintz Romer, they were grateful to be out of the graveyards, but now they looked ahead to the city, and the battle,

that would become a cauldron of misery for all involved.

The following morning the Germans put in one of the strongest and most coordinated attacks of the battle. Their Kampfgruppen were all assembled, tank heavy, with recon elements poised just behind the expected breakthrough point to exploit any successes. A thunderous artillery barrage shook the cold morning air all along the 60 kilometer length of the city, from Rynok in the north to Yelshanka in the south.

The Wikings were the first to jump off, Germania Regiment eager to gain its share of the division laurels. Yet, as if sensing trouble with his very experienced nose, Shumilov had ordered up the 1st Siberian Division from the ferries after they arrived from Beketova, and he sent them to the exact spot the Germans had selected, deploying them along the knotted balka from Maksimovskiy Rail Station to the suburbs of Yelshanka east of the Minina Worker's Settlement. The pioneers stormed the rail station to eliminate that as an enemy barb behind the attack, and in spite of stubborn resistance, the weight of the full Germania Regiment slowly drove the Siberians back.

Hörnlein's attack was even more successful. His assault pioneers finished off the last resistance in the Hospital, and then he threw the main weight of his storm groups north of the balka where a main road wound its way east towards the city center. While the ground remained open, he led with armor, a full battalion committed to the assault. They met and shattered the enemy 56th Tank Brigade, and the Grenadiers followed them, leaping up out of the balka start line. The panzers were able to penetrate the Russian line, advancing 1500 meters by mid-day, with the infantry fighting their way after them. At one point, 2nd Company of the Panzer Battalion nearly overran the headquarters of the 204th Rifle Division, driving it east into the residential sector. They had broken all the way through to the enemy artillery positions, and the tankers could see the Russian guns lined up at the edge of the urban sector, still firing.

Not to be outdone, Beckermann's Brandenburg Division decided to mount a pincer operation to surround and isolate the stubborn enemy defense of the old Army Barracks near the Kirov Airfield. The ground was very open east of that position, a perfect attack corridor that led strait to the Mamayev settlement, bounded by two arms of the extensive Tsarista River and Balka system. If the settlement were reached and taken, it would become the perfect staging point for an attack on the big hill itself. But first that Barracks

position had to be reduced, which would be no small order, and it was now defended by no fewer than six battalions of the 196th Rifle division.

The pincer operation was successful, breaking through to either side of the enemy position, but now the Brandenburgers had a big lump of stone in their throat, they had bagged the bulk of that enemy division with that masterful stroke, but now they would have to find a way to kill it.

In the north, the attack put in by Das Reich was the most successful. Rather than continuing their push towards the Volga north of Rynok as originally planned, they shifted their weight south towards the seam between the two defending Russian divisions. The Samara Rifles were now on their right, their line anchored at the Little Mushroom and extending in a wide arc through the wooded country. On their left was the tough 2nd Volga Rifles. The SS had two initial goals—clear that Mushroom, then punch through the seam between the two divisions. Their intention now was to move just south of the Surchaya Balka, and Rynok itself, following the secondary road that eventually met the main coast road along the river. There a great anomaly now stood as their principal objective, a massive road and rail bridge over the Volga that had not really been built at that site into the 1950s. Yet in this world it had stood as a stubborn bone of contention between Volkov's forces and the Red Army for over ten years. Neither side ever attempted to destroy it, as they both believed it would one day see their victorious troops marching into the enemy's territory.

There it stood, a massive historical anomaly, the vast and rusting hulk of the trans Volga bridge, positioned where the river narrowed a bit, right between Rynok and Spartanovka. Just south of that point the river split around the long almond shaped Denezhny Island, a buffer zone seized by the Soviets long ago to screen both the Barrikady Factory and Dzerzhinsky Tractor Plant. East of that bridge, across the wide Volga, a city had been built up where modern day Volzhskiy now resides, except in this world it was called Volkovskiy. It was guarded against Soviet incursion by two divisions of Volkov's best troops, the 11th and 12th Guards Divisions. If the western end of that bridge could be taken by the Germans, they would establish a very valuable link to the Orenburg 5th Army on the other side of the river. It was something that had dawned on Steiner the previous evening, in spite of his distaste for Volkov and his entire federation.

There is the infantry I need, he thought grimly. If I get that bridge, then all

Volkov's troops on the other side will be fodder for the battle on this side. I can use them to hold and cover portions of the front so I can further concentrate my shock divisions. I will have staffers put out feelers to Gerasimov on the other side of the river. I'm told they actually have a couple divisions over there worth the name, and I can use those troops. Why wait for Manstein when all the infantry I need is right there on the other side of that river!

It was a plan that was bound to emerge from the rubble of that city at one time or another. After his earlier cross Volga offensive ended so disastrously when the Soviets counterattacked and drove his men into the river. Volkov had given orders that there would be no further operations west of the Volga, but now Steiner thought he could persuade the man to coordinate with his troops for an attack on that bridge.

To further his chances for success, he had moved all his Korps assets to support Das Reich, and was now planning to halt the Leibstandarte's offensive operation and order them to cover sectors of the front now held by the 2nd SS Division. That was his plan, the principal operation he had devised for this offensive. All the other attacks put in by Grossdeutschland Division and the Wikings were merely meant to tax the enemy's resources, and pull in his reserves. There was only one question in his mind now: would his enemy see the danger in time to take countermeasures?

See maps for action against the City Center and Das Reich's drive on the Volga bridge at www.writingshop.ws

Part IX

The Bridge

“A bridge has no allegiance to either side.”

— **Les Coleman**

Chapter 25

“**They** are trying to break through to get at Novo Kirovka,” said Shumilov. He had taken the hazardous journey from his headquarters at the Cannery to Chuikov’s command center near the Red October Factory.

“They are trying to break through everywhere,” said Chuikov, “but Kirovka is the least of my worries. The situation in the center is far more serious. They came out of the cemetery region, and there’s a big push underway towards the heart of the city. I sent two tank Brigades in, but we can’t stop their armor. Those new tanks of theirs are just too good.”

“Will they get through?”

“I managed to plug the gap with two battalions of the 154th Naval Brigade, but I have nothing else in reserve there, except Zholudev’s 37th Guards Brigade. I pulled it off the line and moved it south yesterday. It crossed the Tsarista Gorge this morning, but now there’s trouble with the 196th?”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Just the usual sort, it was defending the Army Barracks near the airfield, now it’s been cut off and largely surrounded.”

“The whole division?”

“Most of it.” Chuikov gave the stolid Shumilov a shrug.

“What about the other two Guards Brigades in that Provisional Division? They’re all fresh. The Germans have been wise enough not to attack them directly for some time. Take the Engineer Battalion and spread it out through this wooded area here. Then pull the 39th Guards Brigade out and move it south towards the Barracks. The 37th can then go and stop this thrust towards Central Volgograd.”

Chuikov nodded. It seemed a reasonable solution, unless the Germans got wise to the fact that the old front occupied by those troops had been thinned out. Yet, there was a good deal of ground to give there, a lot of open woodland that ran up to Mamayev Kurgan. He decided to take Shumilov’s advice.

“Now we have the north to consider, and this is the real problem. They shifted the axis of their attack this morning. They were trying to push through

2nd Volga Rifles, now they have shifted south of Rynok.”

“The bridge,” said Shumilov flatly.

“The bridge,” Chuikov echoed. “Rynok is the real crisis point. Everything we slip in on the night barges must land there, and then go by road to the city. We can’t move barges beneath that bridge, it’s too well guarded. Rynok must be held, so I have no choice but to send a brigade of the 13th Guards. I posted one in each of the three factories in the north. 1st Brigade is in the Tractor Plant, and I’m going to move it north through Spartanovka at noon. I have nothing else to send but Special Brigade 115, and they won’t hold half a day.”

“Do what you must,” said Shumilov. “I agree that we must hold Rynok. For that matter, look at the bulge forming in the woodland north of the Tractor Worker’s Settlement. Why not give that up and reform your line here?” He traced a fat thumb on the map in an arc much closer to Spartanovka. “You can get some of the Samara Rifles into the fight if you do that.”

“Agreed,” said Chuikov. “And the south? Can you hold?”

“We’re in much better shape there than it seems. Moving those Divisions out of Beketova made all the difference. Don’t worry, I’ll hold.”

* * *

On the morning of October 28th, Manstein got some much needed relief. The 50th Infantry Division had been slated to go to the Crimea to begin building up a nucleus of a shock group to take Sevastopol. But when the Russians moved most of the garrison troops out by sea to try and save Rostov, the 50th was instead re-routed to the Donets Basin. Now it was close enough to be brought into the fight on the steppes west of the Don. The trains came up through Tatsinskaya, ordered to stop about 10 klicks west of Morozovsk and detrain there. Division commander Schmidt went on to the city to confer with Manstein as to what he expected of his division.

“Are the men fit?” asked Manstein.

“Very fit. They have been itching to get into a fight ever since the mission to Sevastopol was cancelled.”

“Good,” said Manstein. “Well, they will find one here. Have a look at the map. You are detraining just south of the Bystraya River. This enemy

penetration has already come to within ten kilometers of your position as it stands. Move your men up to the river, hold that line and make sure nothing gets around your left flank. Expect enemy armor. In fact, they ran right over 24th Panzer when it was on the line, so be ready. I am trying to get 23rd Panzer off the line to backstop a new defensive front, and your division was the missing piece of the puzzle. As you come forward, the 305th is on your right, then the 336th here, just north of the city. You are the left flank, and I hope to move 23rd Panzer to that sector as soon as possible.”

“I see,” said Schmidt. “I thought we were to move farther east to Volgograd.

“Nobody gets to Volgograd without a 200 kilometer road march,” said Manstein. “As you can see, they have cut the road between here and Kalach. That is what all the fighting is to the east. If I had my wish you would be on the Chir between Surovinko and Chern relieving the Totenkopf Division so that it can continue to attack. If wishes were horses. The lack of good infantry here had been our most serious problem. I’ve been wrangling for every division I could find. Army Group Don now has a total of nine infantry divisions in this sector, and that includes the four Steiner took with him east of the Don. Give me three more and I would settle this affair rather quickly. As it stands, we must squirm a bit.”

That was what it was now coming to in the Wehrmacht—every division mattered, and the infantry every bit as much as the mobile divisions. Schmidt nodded. Then, echoing the words lately spoken by Shumilov, he told Manstein not to worry. “Rest assured, we’ll stop them,” he said with a salute. Then he went off to get his division into the fight.

Schmidt and his men were going to need every bit of the confidence they exhibited. The force coming their way was now so big, and so heavily concentrated, that it was getting in its own way. 3rd Tank Corps had arrived, strung out in a column some 5 kilometers long, but there were too many vehicles, tanks and infantry, all mixed together, so it was forced to halt and wait for the traffic snarl to get sorted out. An impatient man, General Rulenko simply decided to turn his Corps off the road and move due east. Crossing a small balka, he ran right into the 305th Infantry, deployed in a concave hedgehog position some ten to twelve kilometers north of Morozovsk.

In the ensuing battle, the tanks looked like a herd of war elephants as they

swirled around the hedged defensive positions of the German infantry. But the Tank Corp was a well-balanced combined arms force by now, with three mech infantry battalions, three tank brigades, recon elements, engineers, and its own fast moving artillery. Furthermore, when concentrated at any given point on a defensive front, the sheer mass and cross country speed of the tank brigades was almost impossible to stop. The Germans would get kills with their AT guns, but far more tanks would race on through, and then the infantry would select one spot for a concerted attack, some leaping from the backs of the tanks themselves, others carried to the scene on fast moving halftracks or trucks.

The three battalions and engineers would target a single German battalion on the line, and with ample fire support from all that armor. A breakthrough was almost inevitable, and there was then usually another full tank brigade as yet in reserve, soon rushing to this breach to exploit. If the Germans did not have a mobile reserve behind the crust of their infantry, it was very difficult to stop such attacks, and when they were followed up with the swamping human wave attacks of one or two Rifle Divisions, the breach became a gap that would grow wider with each passing hour.

Now the loss of 24th Panzer Division when it was forced into line duty was really beginning to matter. It should have been that fast moving reserve to counterpunch at the critical hour, but instead, for lack of infantry to hold the line, it had found itself right at the center of an attack that was led by Volsky's revitalized 4th Mech Corps, an enormous formation that had been further bolstered by the addition of heavy tank battalions.

With the timely arrival of 50th Infantry Division, Manstein was now desperately trying to swing 23rd Panzer down towards Morozovsk, and have a sword in hand to meet a thrust like this, but it was still fighting a fast moving battle of disengagement, the tank companies moving, stopping to fire, then racing south again, the infantry leaping to their halftracks and vehicles behind the thrumming stream of fire from the MG-42s.

As 23rd Panzer moved south, it was actually moving parallel to the Russian advance, catching up with some of their fast recon units. A running gun battle ensued, with tanks and APCs on either side racing over the snow covered terrain, guns blasting away at one another. The 126th Panzergrenadier Regiment turned, with the pioneer and recon battalions and a company of tanks and stugs. In so doing, it ran right into the 7th Tank Corps,

and the battle thickened.

It was the arrival of 50th Infantry that stabilized that front, slowing the soviet advance and forcing it to consolidate. Yet Manstein now had a most difficult decision, and he requested that Steiner fly to meet with him at Morozovsk, a short but hazardous jump from Gumrak Airfield.

“This is the situation,” said Manstein pointing to the map. “We may stop them, though that has yet to be determined. The loss of most of 24th Panzer Division was a very severe blow. As you can see, they are within 5 kilometers of the rail line at the 161 marker, and also here at this bend west of the city. The main axis of their attack is coming down this road, and it is ten kilometers from us as we speak.”

“Enough to tighten one’s collar,” said Steiner. “What about Winter Storm?”

“We’ve take Surovinko, destroyed three Guards divisions and two of the three Tank Corps they had there, and now we have forced the withdrawal of their 3rd Guards Rifle Corps, relieving the pressure on Oblivskaya. In all this action, 3rd SS has been exemplary. They saved that town, standing like a rock, and now, with the heavy panzers adding weight to their attack, they have been unstoppable. The only question is what to do next? If we do stop this attack on Morozovsk, that will be the best we can accomplish for the moment. Pushing it back is beyond our means without substantial reinforcement. I could take 3rd SS and send it west, or leave it where it is. The latter option will probably guarantee a breakthrough to Kalach.”

“The other two divisions cannot get through?”

“Possibly, if I at least leave one of the Schwerepanzer units there. But you could also prepare an assault group to break out of the Kalach bridgehead at an appropriate time.”

Steiner considered that, rocking on his heels. “My men are very well occupied as it stands,” he said. “Das Reich is driving for the Volga Bridge, but they are fighting very hard to try and stop us. To allow that division to concentrate, I had to extend the lines of Leibstandarte and put the entire division in a defensive posture. I even had to commit all the Korps level assets to beef up Das Reich. This is no easy fight.”

“Nor is it the battle I wanted here,” said Manstein, “particularly not for your Korps. You will not reduce that city easily, or quickly. I think you have already seen this, and your men have not even worked into the heart of the

city yet. However, if we can inflict a decisive check on the enemy here, west of the Don, then we would be free to make some prudent changes. I have six infantry divisions out here. They should all be east of the Don fighting for Volgograd. You have five of our very best mobile divisions in that kessel, and they should be here, smashing each and every attack the Russians throw at us.”

“Yet I promised the Fuhrer I would deliver this city,” said Steiner.

“And Rommel promised him all of Egypt,” said Manstein quickly. “You must put aside your personal pride in that. Now we do what makes best military sense. Clear? Winter Storm proved what we can do. At the moment, our forces are simply not balanced, and the enemy is taking good advantage of that. I intend to correct it.”

“Then how do we proceed?” asked Steiner. “The forces I have are barely enough to cover the frontage. The city is over 80 Kilometers long.”

“Can you clear the Volga Bridge to allow for Volkov’s 5th Army to cross?”

“That is the plan,” said Steiner. “I think another day or two will do the job.”

“Then his troops can form up opposite the Soviet 66th Army along the aqueduct. We need to redeploy in such a way as to allow you to build a strong force at Kalach. I’ll leave the particulars of that to you, but establish a force there capable of breaking out through 24th Army. I will continue with Winter Storm, and when the time is ripe I will signal to begin your breakout operation. Let us call it operation Thunderclap. Once we link up, reestablish communications and a good supply line, then your situation will look a little brighter. We can begin swapping in the infantry I have accumulated in trade for your mobile divisions.”

“Operation Thunderclap,” said Steiner. “I like that. Herr General, I will do as you ask. It may mean temporarily suspending the operations currently underway with Grossdeutschland and the Brandenburg Division, but I can build a strong force for Kalach. And Totenkopf? It would be nice if it was there to greet us when we break out.”

“No I think I will move it west, General Steiner. I want the SS Panzer Korps out of that mess. We should never have committed that force to a big street fight like this. So you come to Totenkopf.” He smiled. “They’ll be waiting for you. But first, it is imperative that you gain control of the Volga

Bridge.”

Chapter 26

The Bridge

Steiner's attack had continued through the 28th of October, with Das Reich summoning troops from the Deutschland Regiment that had been watching the aqueduct line. They were relieved by three battalions of 11th Army Pioneers that had come up from the Don sector after Volkov sent men to keep an eye on the river. So the precious infantry moved like pawns to hold key sectors and enable the mobile forces to move and strike—exactly the opposite of what Manstein wanted.

The addition of that fresh SS regiment put more steam into the attack towards the Volga Bridge, and now the lines of battle were drawing the shape of a man's head, all the troops of 2nd Volga Rifles posted from Rynok north. The narrowing neck of ground where the Surchaya Balka wrinkled down to the bridge was the throat, and then the arc of the Samara Rifle Division the chest of the defense to the south. The SS Korps pioneers and assault gun battalions kept up heavy pressure on that chest, enabling Das Reich to take hold of the throat and attempt to choke the breath out of the enemy.

Some of the leading elements that had made the initial breakthrough from De Führer Regiment, and the supporting panzers, were now running low on ammunition, so the arrival of the Deutschland Regiment was just what the attackers needed. The Germans had pushed to within four kilometers of the bridge when the first battalion of the 13th Guards arrived from the Tractor Factory. It was followed by the 137th Tank Brigade, with 19 T-60s, eight T-34s, and six late model KV-1 tanks. They reached a balka separating Spartanovka from the approaches to the bridge, and began to deploy for a counterattack about 2000 meters behind the Guards.

All along the river, the thunder of artillery resounded from the gorges and cliffs. Many of the shore batteries positioned from the Rynok Ferry north had been turned about to rain fire on the crucial sector, and from across the river, Volkov's guns answered by opening a preparatory barrage on the heavy concrete bunkers that defended the west end of the bridge.

East of the bridge, an unseen buildup of troops was assembling, the men

of Volkov's 12th Orenburg Guards Division. And just a little south, at the ferry sites along the river at Volkovskiy, another crack unit was quietly using the darkness to load weapons and supplies aboard their assault barges. Such a cross river attack had never been possible while the defenders of Volgograd could stand their watch unbothered by other foes. Now it was mustering with a real chance of success. Ivan Volkov had been receiving regular reports from the front, and when he learned of the German thrust towards the bridge, he immediately ordered well laid plans to be pulled out of the General's briefcases and put into motion. He was ready to send this heavily reinforced division over that bridge, and to land those Marines on the river banks to the south, where that balka ran to meet the river a kilometer north of Spartanovka.

On the morning of the 29th, the troops crouched in the low fog that hung over the river, the restless vapor of their own breath seeming to feed and build the mist. Their adrenaline was up, for before them lay the massive steel girders and bed of that bridge, fully two kilometers wide. With silent hand movements from their officers, the first of the rifle squads began to rush forward onto the approached to the span. They would pass their own heavy defensive bunkers, MG posts and concrete guard towers, their movement rustling the fog like wind. The farther they went, the farther from their own defensive shore they would be, and now the sappers took the lead, the men trundling forward with long metal tubes that looked like Bangalore torpedoes.

Conceived in the mind of the British Captain McClintock in 1912, the long tubes housed explosives that could be slid forward as sections of fresh pipe were added from the rear. It allowed a sapper to crouch low, and push the explosive charges toward the obstacle to be attacked and cleared. Volkov's men called these brave sappers the "Chimney Sweeps," clearing out the soot of the enemy defense, and they were to be the fire and smoke at the other end of that chimney, as the full division was poised to push on over that bridge.

It had been thoroughly checked the previous night to see that no enemy demolition charges had been mounted. They were reasonably assured that the span was cleared out to at least the mid-point, but no one was entirely certain whether the western end was wired. They had studied the big supports with fine telescopes for years, looking for any sign of a charge being mounted that might be big enough to destroy the bridge. None was ever seen. In the event

of a demolition from smaller, more hastily mounted explosives, it was not really thought that the massive girders could be brought down. That would take careful placement, and considerable engineering. Yet the road bed itself might be severely damaged or destroyed by smaller charges, and so behind the sappers came men pushing metal plating on small carts if the attackers needed to lay down new bedding.

As this was going on, the Orenburg Marines were already on their barges, grateful for the heavy mist and fog over the river. The thick airs would even dampen the growl of the barge engines, and they hoped to get very close to the western shore before their bold attack was actually discovered. Nothing like this had been attempted since well before the war, and the last time it had ended in disaster for the attackers. So the men were justifiably edgy. The barges slipped away from the concrete quays, and the Marines were soon taking what seemed like the longest ride of their lives. South of the bridge, the river widened considerably.

As the barges reached the midpoint of the river, the fog was at its thickest and they remained unseen. Now the men could hear the mutter of battle growing ever louder, for the Germans were aching close to the bridge, with the armored cars of the Recon Battalion in De Führer Regiment no more than a thousand meters from the western bunker defenses.

The fighting was raging all along the Surchaya Balka south of Rynok, where the Saratov Sapper Regiment had come down the river road from the north to attack the enemy penetration towards the bridge. On the other side of that reaching thrust, the tanks of the 137th Brigade and now the full weight of that regiment of the 13th Guards was being thrown at the Germans. The Russians were desperately trying to pull that hand from the throat of the city, for that was their last overland life line. Even the excess factory workers had been mustered into a brigade and they were marching to the scene from the tractor worker's settlement.

The entire sector near the western end of the bridge was erupting with artillery fire from every quarter. Powerful rounds were landing, some exploding high up in the metal framework, the black smoke leaving an angry weal in the grey sky, the shrapnel raining down on the sappers and riflemen on the bridge. The span was only wide enough to permit a reinforced company to be at the point of attack at any given time, and so the operation was a little like feeding a sturdy wood beam into a saw mill.

Volkov's engineers and guardsmen pushed those Bangalore torpedoes forward under machinegun fire and heavy guns in the fortified bunkers. When they were mowed down, the metal torpedoes clattering to the steel bedding of the bridge, others would bravely come forward to take their place. But it was no place for the soft flesh of a man to be that hour. The western end of that bridge was a place where only steel and concrete could survive the terrible rain of fire being put in from every side. Some rounds striking the bunkers sent big shattered fragments up into the sky, stunning and deafening the men inside. Yet they shook themselves to life and fought on, the blood running from their busted eardrums.

It was then that the noses of the first assault barges slipped into a clear spot on the river, and a watchful sentry near Mechetka Landing in Spartanovka rushed to give warning. Minutes later the sound of a siren cranked up and began to wail on the cold morning air, like the wheezing breath of the defenders as two hands pressed that choking attack from both sides of the river.

3rd Battalion of the 13th Guards had been moving along the shoreline towards the bridge, rushing to stop those German armored cars, the men bringing the AT rifles to the front of the column. Then the sirens alerted them to the danger, and officers looked to see the first assault barges coming up onto the sandy river banks, about 1000 meters south of the bridge. There was a small cove there, but it was a dangerous spot, overlooked by a fortified position that those Marines had undoubtedly come to attack. The armored cars would have to wait. The Soviets could not allow an enemy landing behind them.

The sharp report of gunfire from the south caught Lieutenant Anton Kuzmich Dragan's attention, and he turned to see that two Soviet river boat flotillas were emerging from the fork of the river as it flowed around the long fish shaped body of Denezhny Island. They were obviously firing at other assault barges another two kilometers to the south, so these landings were bigger than they seemed. His men were already rushing to set up their machineguns and mortars, and the riflemen fell prone on a low ridge. They would have a decided advantage on the attackers from that higher elevation.

The Marines landed, rushing onto a sward of scrubby undergrowth as the Soviet machineguns opened fire. Many were cut down in the water as they leapt into the shallows from the barges. Lieutenant Dragan was crouching

low, directing the fire, even as his own men came under artillery barrage from the east bank. Now a second enemy battalion that had landed unopposed to the south was working its way towards his flank, and behind him, the German Panzergrenadiers had finally broken through behind those armored cars. They were already firing at the rear of the concrete fortifications guarding the bridge.

The first waves from those barges were completely stopped, but then the Germans played a trump card. Dragan heard the growl of heavy engines, thinking some of the armored cars must have broken through to his position, but when he looked, he saw instead a dangerous looking hunk of armor approaching from the rear, then another, then two more.

They were heavy assault guns the Germans called the Sturmpanzer IV. In the months ahead, those that fought against them would call them the Brummbär, or Grouch, and it was an ornery beast indeed. Only a very few of these had been made, but here were 24 of them, collected into a heavy assault battalion and played out in this critical moment to bring devastating support fire to the German attack. A squat grey beast, its squarish main gun housing had 100mm frontal armor, through which a short barreled 150mm howitzer protruded like a sawed off heavy shotgun. When they fired at close quarters, the roar of that gun was ear splitting, and the Brummbärs began blasting away at Dragan's battalion, driving his men from that ridge. Just when it seemed that the Guardsmen would drive the Orenburg Marines into the river, the sudden appearance of this heavy armor turned the tide of the entire battle.

Das Reich, heavily reinforced by the SS assault engineers and all those Sturmpanzers, had now driven a hard steel spike right through the seam between the Volga and Samara Rifles. The former was holed up in Rynok, its lines extending back through the Big Mushroom to the Aqueduct, the latter was holding ground west of Spartanovka. That regiment of the 13th Guards was down near the river, locked in a desperate battle with enemy Marines, tanks, infantry and armored cars. Meanwhile, Volkov's 12th Guards kept hurling one battalion after another at the central fortification that defended the bridge, and now the Brummbärs were slamming 150mm rounds into the concrete walls and blasting at the heavy iron doors to the rear. The sound of each heavy round striking them rang out like a great bell, tolling out some inevitable doom.

The attack from the eastern bridge span was gruesome, as the leading

troops were mowed down by machinegun fire. Then, special engineers came forward bearing steel shields, crouching low as they pressed forward like a phalanx of ancient warriors, the long metal tubes bearing explosives jutting from the squad sections like pikes. Inside the bunkers, light 45mm cannon took the place of machineguns, blasting the assault teams time and again. Yet there was a full division behind the tip of that spear, and Volkov's troops kept coming.

One section with a flamethrower team immolated a gun port, allowing an engineer squad to get close enough to get its demolition charge placed. The resulting roar of the explosion shook the bridge, knocking men off their feet, and three fell to their doom into the river below. The 45mm gun was silenced, but the solid structure remained intact. As the next rifle squad rushed forward, a submachine gun challenged them and the entire play began to repeat itself, with the dead mounting higher. At one point, an assault squad had to literally crawl forward over the bodies of their fallen comrades, one man dragging a dead soldier on his back for cover.

On the night of October 29th, that sturdy redoubt finally fell. Its heavy walls were battered and blackened by smoke and fire, its great metal doors bruised and dented, though they still barred the way. There was simply no one inside still alive, and so one by one, the riflemen of the 12th Orenburg Guard climbed through the gun portals to claim that battered tomb. There were still Soviet troops in the two adjoining redoubts to the north and south, and the fighting was far from over, but the bridge over the Volga was now technically in enemy hands, the black eagle banner scored by that dramatic red V was draped over the far end of a battered steel girder.

While this drama had played itself out, Hörnlein's Grossdeutschland Division had pushed out from the cover of that balka, and in heavy fighting that lasted all through the 27th and 28th, they managed to get 2500 meters south into the outskirts of the central city. There, the enemy had rushed in every available reserve, their 56th Tank Brigade, men of the 97th Special Workers Brigade, the whole of 39th Guards Regiment from the Provisional Division, and a battalion from the 154th Naval Marines.

The grenadiers had fought their way right to the edge of the 1st of May Plaza, and beyond it were two shattered smoke towers of the Nail Factory, jutting like broken teeth against the pallid sky. Just beyond that, was Hörnlein's objective, The Gorki Theater, overlooking the river. But then,

strangely, word came to suspend operations. Similar orders went out to the Brandenburgers.

There was some confusion as to what was happening until Steiner found Hörnlein in the shattered Hospital that had been fought over so bitterly near those cemeteries. "A change of plans," he said. "Manstein has Surovinko, and they are pushing for Kalach even now. We are to form a strong assault force there to break out and restore communications. No more 200 kilometer truck rides to get in supply."

"I see," said Hörnlein. "Well, do you want that damn theater or not?"

"At the moment, all operations except those involving Das Reich at the Volga Bridge are suspended. In fact, we may be pulling out."

Chapter 27

All Hallows Eve

“What? We are leaving the city to them? The Führer will not be pleased, to say the least.”

“We will not give up the fight here, but Manstein tells me he has spoken directly with Volkov requesting stronger support, and Volkov then made a personal appeal to Hitler, with a pledge that he will commit all of his 5th Army, and new forces coming up from Khazakstan.”

“Volkov had ten years to try and take this city, and he could never do so.”

“Yet now he will have our help,” said Steiner. “At the moment, he is moving up more troops from Beketova in the south to take over positions presently held by the Wiking Division. It galls me to do so, leaving the city to Volkov like this, but orders are orders, and so I am sending 5th SS west to Nizhne Chirskaya, and I will want the whole of your division to go to Kalach. Under the circumstances, the salient in which you now find yourself is somewhat hazardous. You should make arrangements to pull out and then establish contact with the Brandenburgers.”

“Give back all the ground we’ve fought for these last two days?”

“It can’t be helped. Manstein doesn’t want the mobile divisions here.” There was a harried look in Steiner’s eyes now. “I told him I had promised this city to the Führer before Christmas, and we have ample time to finish the job, but he is set on pulling the entire Korps out. He wants the infantry here in our place.”

Hörnlein nodded, and with a smile. “No offense, General Steiner, but thank god someone is using his head. We should never have crossed the Don without adequate infantry support.”

“Well enough,” said Steiner. “So now we will correct the situation. You are going to Kalach; the Wikings further south where the engineers have scouted good crossing points, and back to the railroad bridge. The Russians pulled out of that sector last night.”

“Then they know what we are planning,” said Hörnlein, “or at least they are smart enough to see the threat. General, they have fought very well here,

better than any of us ever expected. The operations they mounted west of the Don were quite a surprise, and in more than one way. Let us not forget what happened last winter. It is only going to get colder here, the snows deeper, the roads more and more impassable.”

“All the more reason to take Volgograd for winter quarters.”

Again Hörnlein smiled. “There won’t be much of a city left if we do take it,” he said. “These last five kilometers took me nearly three days of very hard fighting. Casualties have been heavy; supplies are never adequate. This place will soon be hell frozen over. We will do much better west of the Don, believe me.”

That difficult but correct decision was now going to change the entire complexion of the battle, at least for the SS. Manstein had the wisdom to see what had gone wrong, and the backbone to take appropriate action. Enlisting the direct support of Ivan Volkov himself was much akin to having Mussolini make a direct appeal to Hitler, but when mated with Manstein’s strongest possible endorsement, Hitler let go of his initial resistance to the idea. Anything that remotely looked like a withdrawal was an anathema to the Führer, but even Halder and all the Generals at OKW had sided with Manstein, stating that the situation west of the Don had to be resolved before the city could be reduced. And if Volkov could help provide the much needed infantry for that fight, all the better.

On the morning of All Hallows Eve, the combined forces of Orenburg and Germany crossed the Don near Tormosin and Nizhne Chirskaya to establish a new front south of the main road between Kalach and Surovinko, and the Wiking Division would become the centerpiece of that thrust. Bridging engineers worked tirelessly, and that evening, the recon battalion of 5th SS was over the river and moving north, the infantry of the Nordland Regiment lining up to begin moving over the newly constructed pontoons.

At Kalach, the 129th Infantry moved up its reserve regiment and began the attack there under a thunderous artillery barrage from hordes of guns Steiner had assembled. They were able to punch a hole in the lines of the Soviet 84th Rifle Division, which had a chilling effect on 24th Army headquarters, particularly when the long column of the Grossdeutschland Division was spotted on the road heading west away from the city. Confusion reigned, as it does in any major tectonic shift of the battle fronts like this. Rokossovsky was soon on the telephone to Zhukov.

“The situation is suddenly very fluid again,” he said. “Chuikov tells me that many of the German divisions that have been pushing into the suburbs of Volgograd have now suspended operations and they are pulling out.”

“Don’t sound so happy about that,” said Zhukov. “I’ve already had reports indicating they are crossing the Don to the south of Kalach. 5th Tank Army was virtually destroyed at Surovinko. Only 1st Guard Tank remains viable.”

“I have had to order the withdrawal of both 9th and 11th Rifle Corps in the Don Bend,” said Rokossovsky, “so that leaves the entire lower Don open to crossing operations. They are trying to break out at Kalach as well.”

“And they will,” said Zhukov.

“What about Operation Saturn?”

“It achieved a remarkable penetration, but they brought in yet another infantry division and managed to stop it four to six kilometers from Morozovsk. Now they are reinforcing that position further with elements of that damn Death’s Head Division. The question now is what to do about this development. What is your situation?”

“I managed to pull 11th Rifle Corps back. They are deployed south of the main road to Kalach. 9th Rifle Corps is getting beat up in the fight to stop their 48th Panzer Corps. But the flank is now hanging in thin air there, and they are beginning to push out patrols to the north. I have no mobile reserve, and 1st Guard Tank is still engaged. There is now a 30 kilometer gap in the front centered on Surovinko, and I have nothing to send there.”

There was silence for some time before Zhukov spoke again. “We have done what we could,” he said. “They have finally seen the error they made in crossing the Don with their best mobile divisions. So now our party is over. The only mobile force we presently have is 1st Tank Army near Morozovsk. I will have no choice but to suspend operations there and pull that force out. So we have driven them to the ropes, but those ribs are tougher than we thought. Now we move to the center of the ring again. As for 5th Shock Army, we will leave it where it is for the moment. That will keep a lot of forces preoccupied near Morozovsk.”

“And Volgograd?” asked Rokossovsky.

“The bad news is that they have taken the Volga Bridge. The good news is that they are now pulling out their better divisions, and it will be some time before they can move in significant reinforcements to replace them. Volkov’s

dogs are moving up from Beketova. They have also begun reoccupying Sarpinskiy Island.”

“Like the scavengers they are,” said Rokossovsky. “They’ll take nothing we don’t give to them first.”

“This allows us some time to reorganize the defense of the city,” said Zhukov. “Unfortunately, with the bridge lost, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to get supplies in by river as we were doing. So now I must look to building up the 66th Army. That is the only force we can use to attempt to relieve the city.”

“How very strange,” said Rokossovsky. “Last year Volkov’s troops were sitting right where 66th Army is now, trying to get at Volgograd from the north. Now here we sit contemplating the same thing.”

“The tides of war become rip currents around places like that city,” said Zhukov. “Don’t worry, we will hold it again this year. I have given Sergei Kirov my word.”

“Like we promised him we would save Moscow?”

“That was different. That traitor, Beria, had everything to do with the difficulty there. That said, we still have a third of the city, for what it’s worth.”

“What is Volgograd worth? We get no supplies from it. Now that it is cut off like this, all the industry there will serve only to try and keep Chuikov supplied. Why do we sacrifice two armies there? They will be much needed elsewhere. And for that matter, how long can we leave these shock armies this far south of the Don with the Germans east of Voronezh?”

“It is winter,” said Zhukov. “Their operations will come to a halt, just as they did last year.”

“Only this year we have little left to throw at them,” said Rokossovsky.

“Be patient,” said Zhukov. “The factories in Leningrad are working night and day to build new tanks. There is more in the works than you realize. Everything depends on that city now—everything. Sergei Kirov has moved the government there now that Berzin has cleaned everything up after Beria’s treachery. If we can manage to hold on to Rostov and Volgograd until spring, then things will look a little different.”

“But what did we gain from all of this?” asked Rokossovsky. “2nd Guards Rifle Corps is nothing more than a headquarters now. We lost both 24th and 25th Tank Corps as well.”

“What did we gain?” Zhukov asked him back again. “Time, Konstanty, time. It was all about getting us to General Winter. Now we have time, and those tank corps will be replaced. Just wait and see.”

* * *

Things were already starting to look very different on the front as divisions began moving in all directions. A *kampfgruppe* from 3rd SS of four battalions and a company of tanks arrived at Morozovsk, but given the withdrawal that night of the 1st Tank Army, that front had already stabilized.

“Thank you for coming,” said Manstein. “Rest here tonight and we will see what things look like in the morning. I may be sending you right back east to join the rest of your division, only this time I have a ride for you. There is fresh rolling stock here, and the rail line is open, at least as far as Oblivskaya. I think 48th Panzer Korps, and the backbone in this infantry we deployed here, has won the day. Soon I will have Steiner bring out the rest of your Korps. Then we do some broken field running again. I am going to continue north into the gap in the front above Surovinko, and I expect that will soon move the enemy mobile group here. Tonight I must fly to meet with Halder to plan the redistribution of forces on the front. I will personally recommend that Totenkopf gets a unit citation for exceptional valor and skill in these battles along the Chir.”

For the Russians it was now a case of “so close but yet so far.” They had taken ground, taken losses to do so, but the premature offensive had threatened to bottle up the cream of Steiner’s SS, though Manstein was now taking steps to correct that. They had cut the rail line that had taken months for the Germans to convert, and now it would take another three weeks to a month to repair all that damage. The shuffling of forces that would soon be underway would give a much needed respite to the defenders if Volgograd. Steiner would have to swallow his pride and turn that battle over to someone else.

Come the 1st of November Manstein was meeting with the Führer to explain what had happened, and why he had made the decisions he took. “A city fight is no place for a Panzer Division,” he lectured. “Particularly *that* city. The streets are piles of rubble from the bombing and shelling, and the enemy moves through that debris like rats. In fact, the troops have already

coined a name for the fighting: *Rattenkrieg*. They are in the sewers beneath the streets, and in the cellars of every building. We will leave the Assault Gun Battalions there, as they can give the infantry excellent fire support, but that is what we need now, good infantry. In my estimation, it will take no less than ten divisions.”

“Ten divisions?” It sounds like we will have a second Verdun there,” said Hitler.

Halder’s eyes narrowed. Here was Manstein again, the oh so reasonable, smooth talking General come to scavenge for more troops.

“Can’t we send in specialists trained for this type of city fighting?” he suggested.

“Yes,” Hitler echoed. “Richthoven suggested the same thing to me days ago. What about the Pioneers, the Engineers? Are they not specially trained in demolition and urban warfare?”

“A very good point, my Führer,” said Halder. “Such units could be combed from the ranks and assembled into a special Sturmpanzer Brigade. In fact, such a unit already exists in Steiner’s SS Panzer Korps.”

“And it will be left behind, along with perhaps one of the Divisions presently there,” said Manstein. “My preference would be Brandenburgers, though they should be reinforced and reorganized as an infantry division. Armored vehicles are no good in that rubble, nor can we take them into the sewers. 1st and 2nd SS should be withdrawn immediately, and the entire SS Panzer Korps reassembled for mobile operations west of the Don. This brings us back to the infantry. Assault Pioneers can be the tip of the spear, but we must have men to take and hold captured ground, especially on the shoulders of salients driven into the city. At times, good divisions like Grossdeutschland had to assign fully half their combat units to such work, limiting troops available at the Schwerpunkt of the attack. So I say again—if you must have that city, then we must have the infantry, and no less than ten divisions.”

“How many are available in Army Group Don?” asked Hitler.

“Nine, and they are strung out for 120 kilometers between Surovinko and Morozovsk. I presently have them in two Korps groups under Hollidt and Fetter-Pico. Initially I have earmarked one division from each to go to Stalingrad, the 305th and 336th. Four others are already there, but that leaves a shortfall of four divisions. If Halder can find them for me, then I am

prepared to prosecute that battle to a successful conclusion. If not, then I question even trying. What good is the city in any case? Now that we have the Volga Bridge, nothing gets in or out of the place. Why not just allow Volkov to invest it, strengthened by a few of our own infantry divisions, and then forget about it?”

“What?” Hitler flashed a disapproving glance. “Herr General, there are also political considerations here.”

“Political considerations? Are they worth what it will cost us to take that pile of rubble? There are certainly no economic considerations. We have bombed and blasted all their factories. The city is nothing but a massive concrete millstone around the neck of Sergei Kirov. Why he decided to try and defend it is beyond my understanding.”

“He decided to defend it because I decided to take it,” said Hitler, “just as I directed the Army should also take Moscow. We must show them that nothing can stop us, not their men, their steel, nor their will to resist. Once we take Volgograd, they will be completely broken in morale. You will see.”

“My Führer,” said Manstein, and with a sidelong glance at Halder now. “The city we should be thinking about now is not Volgograd, nor even Rostov. The former is of no use to either side, and the later will fall in good time, sealing the fate of all Soviet forces in the Kuban. No, the city we should be thinking about is Leningrad. Yes, I can hear you already, General Halder. I argued strongly for the southern approach, and it will achieve all its ends in due course. Now, however, particularly for the coming spring, we must look north to Leningrad. That city is presently their arsenal and major production site. It is also the heart of the relocated Soviet Government, and the principal economic engine of their nation. Leningrad... That is where the Army should now be directed.”

“With the Donets Basin not yet secured?” said Hitler.

“I will see to that as soon as we resolve this nonsense concerning Volgograd—that and the Kuban, they will both be on my dance card. As for Rundstedt, serious thought should now be given to a shift in gravity to the northern front.”

“I never thought I would hear you say such a thing,” said Halder.

“I say it now, because the time is ripe. All things in good time, Herr General. And I will say one thing more—if they do hit us again this winter, I predict that is where they will come from, the north, against Smolensk. At

present, almost every panzer and motorized division we have is east of Voronezh! Where are you going, to Saratov on the Volga to fight another battle like we already have at Volgograd? Further operations in that direction will lead us nowhere.”

“Yet we could pocket all the forces you have been struggling with if we made such an attack,” said Halder. “We could destroy all those Siberian Shock Armies that now plague you.”

“Pocketing them is one thing, destroying them quite another. Have you forgotten the six months we sat outside the Kirov Pocket? We have already linked up with Volkov, and now it is time we let him shoulder some of the burden in the south so we can finish the job elsewhere. The decisive battle of this war will not be fought at Volgograd—it must be fought at Leningrad.”

Both men fell silent, for they knew that Hitler would be the one to make the decision here, and Halder could already see the stiffening of his posture, as if his inner resolve was hardening the lines of his body, his eyes narrowing, the festering anger that was always there beginning to waken.

The Führer leaned over the map table, his eyes alight.

Part X

Führerbefehl

“Volgograd is no longer a city. By day it is a cloud of burning, blinding smoke. When night arrives, the dogs plunge into the Volga and swim desperately to the other bank. Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long. Only men endure.”

— German Soldier

Chapter 28

“Leningrad,” said Hitler, as if he were spitting out the word like some vile phlegm in his throat. “Oh, my Generals are all so clever, so reasonable. In 1941 you tell me I must take Moscow to win the war, and we burned half that city to the ground! Then, in 1942 you tell me I must take Volgograd to win the war, and now that we reach the place, you want to chew on it like a dog with a bone and then throw it to Volkov! Now you tell me I must take Leningrad to win the war in 1943. Where does it end? When will my Generals finish something they start? The Russians are still in Moscow, they are still in Volgograd, and I will see both cities completely destroyed! Understand? I will *not* leave them to the enemy.”

It was really the first time Manstein had seen the rage in Hitler. In the past he had always been able to impose calm on these meetings, using a combination of flattery and reason to manage the Führer’s volatile nature. This time he could see that Hitler would not be mollified or reasoned with.

“Leningrad,” said Hitler, coming to some inner decision. “That is all well and good for the spring. As for Volgograd, we will find the troops required to finish the job, for that city *will* be taken this winter. This is a Führer Order! Look how they struggle to defend it? Can’t you see? It is a point of honor for them now, just as their stand at Kirov was last year. In Volgograd, they have invested all their foolish notions of duty, and their patriotic zeal to that decrepit Soviet State, the whore they call their motherland. Well I will have that city! I will destroy it completely, if for no other reason than the fact that Sergei Kirov, desperate as his situation is, still fights to keep it from falling into our hands.” Hitler smashed his fist down onto the map table, as if to hammer and crust the stubborn enemy he detested

He was breathing heavily now, then straightened, slowly composing himself, an unsteady hand running through the fall of dark hair on his brow. “Send for the transcribers. I will compose new orders, to be carried out immediately, and there will be no further discussion.”

* * *

Hitler's order was inscribed and circulated to all ranking officers, so there would be no uncertainty as to his wishes for the coming months.

FÜHRER DIRECTIVE 46

1 NOV 1942

Part 1 of 2

Redistribution of Forces

- 1) The redistribution of forces involving the movement of fresh Infantry Divisions East of the Don will be carried out no later than 15 NOV 42, and involve the transfer of the following units to constitute the new Army of the Volga. General Hansen of the 11th Army HQ will assume overall command of the following forces:
- 2) Infantry Divisions: 24, 75, 87, 102, 129, 170, 294, 305 and 336
- 3) 3rd Motorized Infantry Division will constitute the reserve.
- 4) The above forces will cooperate with units of the 4th and 5th Orenburg Armies to invest and reduce Volgograd no later than 1 JAN 43.
- 5) Concurrent with this deployment, all elements of Steiner's SS Panzer Korps presently east of the Don, with the exception of the Brandenburg Division, will be withdrawn west of the Don and remain under overall command of the Army Group Don. This Korps will now be composed of the following units: 1SS Leibstandarte, 2SS Das Reich, 3SS Totenkopf, 5SS Wiking.
- 6) Division Grossdeutschland will also be withdrawn into Army Group Don Reserve and rebuild as a full strength Panzer Division.
- 7) Division Brandenburg, presently structured as a Panzer Division, will remain East of the Don as an independent formation, and reorganize to the structure of a heavy Motorized Infantry Division. As such, the

Panzer Regiment of the division and mechanized transport will be relinquished to Army Group Don Reserve, and the division will reform with four Motorized Infantry regiments, the last to arrive from Germany no later than 18 NOV 42. The addition of Specialized Assault Pioneers and Assault Gun Battalions will compensate for the loss of the Panzer Regiment. Division Brandenburg is to be the leading assault element for operations against Volgograd.

- 8) After securing the line of the Don itself, Army Group Don under General Manstein is to crush enemy resistance in the Donets Basin no later than 1 JAN 43, and prepare the Army for further offensives aimed at occupying the Kuban as part of the overall Spring Offensive.
- 9) Armeegruppe Center will temporarily suspend operations for the winter and detach 3rd and 4th Panzer Armies to the vicinity of Minsk to refit and prepare for the future operation against Leningrad.

Instructions for Intensified Action Against Banditry in the East will follow in Part II of this Directive.

All things considered, it was a more reasonable order than Manstein had feared. He would get his wish to withdraw Steiner's Korps back under his overall command west of the Don, and Steiner's failed promise to deliver the city was overlooked, if not forgotten by an increasingly brooding Führer. He would also see the fruitless drive into the hinterlands east of Voronezh halted, and plans being laid for what must surely be the coup de grace, the drive on Leningrad. Yet the onerous tasks ahead were the necessity of occupying the Donets Basin and Kuban, and Hitler would refuse to entertain any further discussion concerning Volgograd. He simply wanted the city taken, block by block.

The most interesting feature of this order was the complete restructuring of the Brandenburg Division, making it into a "square" Motorized Infantry Division with four regiments, which was the structure it had actually assumed in Fedorov's history. To do so it was heavily reinforced with new forces raised in Germany, including a roundup of already existing commando units

under overall control of the Abwehr. Each of the four regiments would include one full battalion of specialists in, demolitions, infiltration, and urban warfare. A call went out to all units in the Army to forward the names of suitable candidates to OKW.

Manstein made good use of the tanks received through the dissolution of the Brandenburg Panzer Regiment, using them to flesh out depleted companies in the other SS divisions. And all the mechanized transport, largely Spw-251 halftracks, mobile flak, Marders, and other AFVs that had lifted the two former Panzergrenadier Regiments in the division, were also used to restore lost or damaged vehicles in the other SS units. There were plenty of trucks to repay the Brandenburgers and keep them mobile, and plenty of towed guns to deliver, but the Panzergrenadiers in Steiner's Korps needed those halftracks. The facelift, carried out with lightning speed and given the highest possible priority, would see Brandenburg Division soon brought up to strength for the task ahead.

Of the nine regular infantry Divisions assigned to the Army of the Volga, the 75th, 87th, 102nd and 129th were already east of the Don holding positions along the river itself and the aqueduct. In the next two weeks, as the remaining units arrived to relieve Steiner's SS Korps, Manstein continued his offensive north from Kalach against the Soviet 24th Army, his objective being to clear the west bank of the Don and by so doing relieve both the 102nd and 129th Divisions of that defensive duty, making them available as reserve units for the city fight.

The 305th, 336th and 294th were the first three units sent over the bridge at Kalach, taking up positions held by the Wiking Division and Grossdeutschland Division nearest to Volkov's 4th Army in the south. The Brandenburgers remained opposite the main city center, and the 24th, 294th and eventually the 170th moved to the north, relieving both 1st and 2nd SS. They were joined near the Volga Bridge by Volkov's 11th Guards.

Hitler's wish for specialized engineers was also taken to heart, and fresh units were combed from other Army Korps to constitute new Assault Pioneer Battalions. Instead of tanks, all the assault gun units that had been in the SS Korps, and all its special engineering units and heavy artillery, remained behind when Steiner departed. So the redistribution of forces created a leaner, infantry heavy force to reduce the city, and moved all the superb mobile divisions out of that meat grinder to the open steppe country where they

could now ply their deadly craft of the mobile art of war.

Nothing further was discussed about Leningrad, though Hitler took all that Manstein had said to heart, and began ruminating inwardly on the battle ahead for the coming spring. If the fall of Volgograd and the capture of Rostov and the Donets Basin did not force the Russians to capitulate by January 1st, he had every intention of taking Manstein's advice to heart, and quietly instructed Halder to begin a transfer of panzer units from the vicinity of Voronezh to a central reserve north of Minsk as he had specified in number 9 of his order. The German Army would not sit idle during the long winter ahead. They would take this time to rebuild, redeploy, and to guard against possible enemy counteroffensives, as Manstein had warned.

* * *

On the Soviet Side, Chuikov took advantage of the major shift in the enemy camp, using the time to raise more recruits from the remnants of the city's able bodied population. Even women and girls were conscripted, trained in the use of AA guns and sent to crew batteries all along the Volga near the key ferry sites. While nothing was getting in via the river any longer, the Soviets still had a large bridgehead on Sarpinsky Island, and complete control of the significant mass of Denezhny Island. Their advantage in gunboat flotillas made them masters of the river in and around those islands, though the boats would mainly patrol at night to avoid enemy shore batteries.

Though the city itself was bruised and bombed, its four factories continued to work, including one that was not present in Fedorov's history, the Steel Foundry in the heart of Novo Kirovka. The Russians were still building guns, producing ammunition, and even constructing tanks, though the output was small from the Tractor Factory. Chuikov would not receive any more reinforcements from the outside either, though Zhukov was quietly moving in divisions to shore up the aqueduct line, which now included the 99th, 116th and 332nd Rifle Divisions, and the newly arrived 284th "Tomsk" Division sent by Karpov. To these he added one newly reformed Tank Corps, the 13th.

West of the Don, the withdrawal of 1st Tank Army, and Volsky's 4th Mech Corps, put an end to the Operation Saturn. A master of the indirect approach, Manstein's move into the gap north of Surovinko compelled

Zhukov to move those forces. A lesser General might have left them near Morozovsk, but this was something Zhukov could not afford to do. The Shock Armies held their positions until Manstein began to press them. In the face of any determined German thrust, they had orders to withdraw in as good order as possible. The premature offensives had done much to delay the fall of Volgograd, but they had not been able to hold the hard won ground they earned, nor could they stop Manstein from methodically moving in the railroad crews to make good all they had spoiled on the lines leading east over the Don.

Yet after losing 2nd Guards Rifle Corps, half of 9th Corps, and both 24th and 25th Tank Corps, Zhukov wanted to keep all his remaining mobile forces in reserve. Somewhere, somehow, he still had to mount a winter offensive in 1942. The previous year it had come late, but achieved good results. This year it would be late as well. It would come, as Manstein had predicted, from the fattened units that had been on the lines west of Moscow, and its object was the capture of Smolensk.

Yet forewarned is forearmed. Halder had agreed with Manstein's assessment concerning Smolensk, and so he moved most of Hoth's Panzer Army west from Voronezh to stand in reserve there. They would be instrumental in frustrating Zhukov's attack, a fast moving mobile reserve that was still in good enough shape to do the job. After that battle, he would then move Hoth to a position north of Minsk, and those divisions would go into static mode as they began to refit and replace old equipment. His staff was already working on the plans for Operation *Untergang*—the 'Downfall' planned for the final blow against the Soviet Union in 1943.

The Germans helped him in this planning by suspending most offensive operations through the early weeks of November. 2nd Panzer Armee under Model stopped at Anna, about 100 kilometers east of Voronezh. Hoth's 3rd Panzer Armee would never come to its support now. In those two weeks of November, the Germans instead focused on reducing the Voronezh Pocket, which put an end to 14 more Soviet divisions. Then, rather than leaving a big bulge in the line that would point 2nd Panzer Armee nowhere, the Germans pulled back to the line of the Don in the Voronezh sector, and Model's 2nd Panzer Army began to refit for the Spring.

The German Army of the Volga would not be fully supplied until December 1st, but the redistribution of divisions specified by Führer

Directive 46 would be completed on schedule. It meant that Halder had to reluctantly give up precious infantry, but Hitler promised him that many more divisions were being raised to make up for the transfer orders.

The war was now going to move off in another dangerous direction, and it remained to be seen as to whether the Soviet Union could survive the loss of the Donets, and then the Kuban, if Manstein could work his will to carry out Hitler's orders in the south. In the meantime, the specialists and pioneers began slipping potato masher grenades into their belt lines and shouldering their demolitions and flame throwers. The battle for the city of Volgograd was only just beginning.

Chapter 29

Into the City

On the night of November 15th, even while the division itself was still reorganizing, the first assault groups of the Brandenburg Division began to slip forward over the ground that had been won and held by Grossdeutschland Division. Now the emblem of the ghostly mask and sword of steel would try the Soviet defense on the northern fringe of Novo Kirovka. The Russian Special Worker Brigade 160 had been moved up to infiltrate back into that area, and their 1st Battalion suddenly found itself surrounded on three sides as the expert commando teams poured out of the cemeteries where Hörnlein's men had fought like the spirits of the fallen. They moved with great stealth, infiltrating silently through the suburbs.

The leading elements of the 1st Brandenburg Regiment continued on through the city, penetrating largely unchallenged all the way to a wide open area known as Resurrection Plaza, very near the main road and rail line leading north into Central Volgograd. Their presence there wasn't discovered until about 2 AM, when artillery fire began to drop sporadically on the plaza itself.

Guriev's 39th Guards had set up headquarters in the Univermag Department store, a major supply depot for Chuikov's army. He had positioned his three battalions there, at the Nail Factory, and at the Gorki Theater. Now those last two were ordered to move over the partially frozen stream that separated Central Volgograd from the neighborhoods to the south.

2nd Brandenburg Regiment had been posted at the Hospital Hörnlein had taken, and its spirits arose from the small adjoining cemetery. The Russians had reoccupied some of the ground in the city Hörnlein had fought for, and now their lines were two kilometers west of the Nail Factory and the small 1st of May Plaza. That salient had been too deep to hold during the German reorganization, but now 2nd Regiment came to reclaim it. They found a very solid defense there, including tanks from the 56th Tank Brigade, and had to radio Division HQ to request Marders and Sturmgeschütz support.

3rd Regiment came out of the hard won Army Barracks near the Kirov

Airfield where so many men of the Russian 196th Rifle Division had fought and died two weeks earlier. They pushed east towards the settlement of Mamayev, about five kilometers from the famous hill it was named after. No artillery prep was made for any of these attacks, and fires were held until the Brandenburg commando teams had achieved maximum infiltration, and identified targets to be shelled. Then the boom of artillery fire to the north resounded over the stillness of the city, a diversionary attack that had been planned by the newly arrived 24th Infantry Division. The 72nd Division that had relieved Leibstandarte also renewed the attack against the Samara Rifles, and those were the only actions authorized that night. The big push was scheduled to jump off at dawn, with every division on the line planning a series of blows designed to place the enemy defenses under maximum strain.

As the cold skies began to lighten, there came a roar of many guns opening fire in the north. Most were Volkov's heavy shore batteries, now beginning to pound Rynok, where the 2nd Volga Rifles was still stubbornly defending. Three more battalions of the 11th Guards moved over the Volga Bridge and now Volkov's best troops threw themselves at the balka just north of Spartanovka, where the stolid Soviet 13th Guards would meet them man to man.

West of that position near the river, most of the assault pioneers and heavy Sturmgeschutz companies left behind by Steiner were now massed in one great shock group. They pushed to break through the lines of the Samara Rifles, backed by the whoosh of Nebelwerfers and the pounding explosions from those 150mm rockets. Even the newly arrived 170th Division that had relieved Das Reich got into the act, making a concerted attack on the Big Mushroom position. It had been probed the previous night, but the leading German companies had been thrown back by shock groups of Soviet SMG troops. Now the Germans came for the Mushroom with a much heavier attack, two full battalions reinforced by a company of the division pioneers.

The forces assembled here were much better suited to the city fighting, lighter equipped, but able to move through the rubble strewn streets, and into all the buildings and cellars. Furthermore, many of these divisions had fought during the reduction of the Kirov Pocket and Bryansk, where they got a good taste of what street fighting was like. Now they were putting that experience to very good use.

There were good penetrations at many points. 24th Infantry was able to

drive the enemy from the Airfield Settlement about six kilometers north of the Kirov Flight School. 305th Infantry pushed about 1000 meters into Yelshanka. The 336th just to its north was now fighting in the outskirts of Novo Kirovka, but it was the elite Brandenburg Division, the specialist, commando teams, demolition squads, and gritty veteran Sergeants that made the difference.

1st Regiment had cleared all the neighborhoods around Resurrection Plaza, controlling that place before they ran into a very tough battalion of the 154th Naval Brigade. Elements of the 2nd Regiment had almost regained the last of the ground formerly taken by Grossdeutschland Division, and they were now about a thousand meters from the 1st of May Plaza. Yet the most dramatic breakthrough of the day came from 3rd Brandenburg Regiment.

That storm group had fought its way into Mamayev settlement, battling Soviet Tanks supporting the remnants of the 196th Rifle Division. They swept through most of that neighborhood, and the commandos found a way though and over a balka running along the western knees of Mamayev Kurgan. On they went, the assault teams leading the way as they climbed, and then they realized the vital central hill was not yet heavily garrisoned.

Hauptmann Behrmann radioed for support, and the fast moving Motorcycle Recon Company raced to the scene, waved through the gap that had been cleared by the commandos. The men dismounted, moving up to join the sections that had already scaled the heights, and as darkness fell, they reached the top, gunning down a few surprised artillery observation posts. There they stood on Hill 102, the men gazing out at the long agony of the city stretching north and south. There was no electricity, except in one small segment of Novo Kirovka to the south. But fires raged all through the city, and the evening sky was glowing red, the smell of burning wood thick on the air. They could make out the outlines of the battle lines, seeing the wink of gunfire, and the explosions of grenades and small mortar rounds. It seemed from that high point that they had just captured the whole of the city, but their mastery of that promontory would be brief.

The field phones rattled and rang in Chuikov's headquarters and Borzov, the commander of the hapless 196th Rifle Division, was soon bawling on the line.

"They have got around my division to the north," he exclaimed. "I think they have men on Mamayev! The road into the Tsarista Gorge is completely

open!”

“Alright, alright,” said Chuikov, trying to calm the other man down. “I sent Special Brigade 124 that way late this afternoon. They should be approaching the north slope of the hill by now, from the Kirov Flight School. Don’t worry. I have a solution to the problem.”

That solution was going to be the 137th Tank Brigade again. It had fallen back to a reserve position and received new tanks from the factory. Now all three battalions were rolling through the thickening darkness towards the blackened bald height of Mamayev. A battalion of the 154th Naval Brigade had to spread out along a two kilometer front to try and screen the gap Borzov had warned about, and another regiment of the 13th Guards was ordered to leave its reserve position in the Red October Factory and prepare to counterattack that hill the following morning.

Chuikov’s immediate solution was more direct. He had big guns in fortified positions all along the shore from that factory to Central Volgograd to the south. There were batteries in the Mill near the 9th of January Square, in the old Railroad Bureau building, in the Metalworks near the Locomotive Depot and in the Steel Plant at the heart of the winding curve of rail lines known as the Tennis Racquet. Minutes later they were all given orders to blast the top of that hill, and the men of that recon company were soon diving for any cover they could find. The Germans had snuck into the pantry and raided a cupboard they should not have been able to reach that day. It was only the skill of those infiltration teams that allowed them to slip through and put men on that hill, but now they would have to pay the piper. Some of the howitzers in those batteries were as big as 305mm.

The Germans could not stay on that high, exposed hill under that fire, and the MC Company withdrew, making contact with the commandos about a thousand meters down the west slope of the hill. Along the way they had briefly engaged worker troops from the 124th Special Brigade, but they were special in the wrong way, mostly untrained and ill-armed men from the Red October Settlement. Yet they were good for filling gaps in the line with human flesh and bone, and the enemy did not know what their caliber was yet.

Studying his map, Chuikov could see how bold this German attack was. The unit that had reached that hill was special in the right way, and he knew he had to send the very best units he had to secure that position. He was

planning a swift right cross with the 137th Tank Brigade, which swung up through the Kirov Flight School to hit the enemy flank and attempt to cut that incursion off. Then three battalions of the 13th Guards assembled near the water cisterns on the eastern slope of the hill, ready to attack. Meanwhile, his men on the hill were now directing fire from those heavy guns along the river.

When that attack came, the Russian Guardsmen rushed up the hill with a shout, cresting the scorched and barren crown, where not even snow could blot out the burning laceration of war. They leapt to the attack, charging down the far side of the hill, submachineguns chopping in the cold air. The German Recon Company was quickly pushed back, and within 20 minutes, Chuikov was again the master of Mamayev Kurgan, with the enemy clinging to positions on the lower western slopes

That crisis at least addressed for the moment, Chuikov took in the rest of the reports from his staff. 193rd Rifle Division was having trouble near the Barrikady Worker's Settlement and was requesting reinforcements. The 10th NKVD sector was quiet so he ordered them to send over a machinegun battalion, but it would not be enough. Five companies of the 41st and 46th German Pioneer Battalions had stormed into the settlement, overrunning a battalion of the 193rd Divisional artillery, and a company of mortars. The men of the 103rd were too slow to react, the German Pioneers too precise in their attacks, and too determined. It was yet another crisis point that would grow in the hours ahead.

Then the real trouble started. That heavy German Assault Pioneer group west of Spartanovka was finally breaking through on the rightmost flank of the Samara Rifles. The Germans had put together a big *kampfgruppe* there, with units from the 72nd Infantry, three assault gun companies, and a lot of engineers. They had reached the edge of the cemetery just outside the western edge of the town, right where Chuikov had moved the artillery of the 13th Guards Division. Now those guns would have to move again, which meant there would be no supporting fires from them for at least the next few hours.

The regiment of the 13th Guards he had sent to stop Volkov's Guardsmen had stood like a stone wall north of Spartanovka for three days, but now their positions were slowly being flanked to the west. He reluctantly sent them an order to withdraw 500 meters, and said goodbye to Volkov's men with a good barrage from the powerful Guards Mortar Battalion. The Volga Rifles

still held all of Rynok, but now the gap between them and the rest of the defenders was another 500 meters wider, and over ground he never expected to see his men set foot on again. There were too many men coming over that bridge from Volkov's 5th Army each night after dark. So by day he had his artillerymen register their fire with spotting rounds, so he could saturate the bridge with punishing fire that night.

In spite of that, there were already 8 battalions of Volkov's best troops lined up north of Spartanovka, and the ground they held was ground the German assault battalions did not have to cover. By dawn on the 18th of November, the Germans had fought their way through yet another graveyard, the cemetery west of the town. They were intent on pushing past the western side of the town, towards the balka that marked a natural northern boundary for Volgograd.

Just beyond it was the Tractor Factory, and after holding for another day, Chuikov could see that Spartanovka was inevitably going to be flanked and cut off. The only way he could stop that persistent German drive was to yield ground, and so on the night of 19 NOV, he ordered the Samara Rifles to pull back out of the wooded country where they had been fighting and reestablish their lines along the balka. The new defensive front now ran west about five kilometers to reach the positions of the 10th NKVD Brigade screening the Tractor Worker's Settlement.

As for the plight of the 193rd Rifle Division south of the NKVD troops, Smekhotvorov reported penetrations to either side of his division, which was now in considerable disarray. It was the primary force covering the ground approaching the Barrikady Factory, and the Worker's Settlement for that plant had already been overrun about seven kilometers west of the factory site.

One thing led to another.

The collapse of the 193rd compromised the flank of Gurtiev's 308th Siberian on its southern flank, and now the Worker's Settlement for the Red October Factory was also threatened. The outer defenses of the entire northern industrial sector of the city was slowly yielding to the hammer blows, one after another on Thor's Anvil. Only at Mamayev Kurgan was there any good news, where the counterattack of the 13th Guards had swept the Germans from the hilltop and stopped that serious penetration to the heart of the city. All the battle lines south of that had been forced to yield ground

and consolidate, but they were holding.

These first five days fighting finally concluded the preliminaries. The Germans had to ease up the pressure and rest the troops, assessing their own losses and meeting to plan the next phase of the battle. Before them lay the names of places that had become famous in Fedorov's history of these events, the Factory District in the north; the Rail Plaza, Power Station, and Central Depots in the center, where key sites like Pavlov's House, Univermag Department Store, the Central Bank, Red Square and the Gorki Theater would soon be tested again under the hammer of war.

In the south, two of Shumilov's divisions still held half of Yelshanka, and two more were battling in Novo Kirovka. In the heart of that segment of the city lay the new Steel Foundry Plant, just north of the dry Yelshanka River. Behind the division lines, closer to the Volga, the citizen militias were fortifying another string of would be famous places, the Saw Mills of the Lumber Trust, Balka Causeway, the Cannery, Lumber Yards, and a tall solid concrete structure with multiple chimneys that would come to be called the Grain Elevator.

The misery and mayhem of war in Volgograd had many names, and many faces. Soon those faces would be drawn and gaunt, fringed by any rag of clothing to be found in a vain attempt to stave off the terrible cold.

Chapter 30

3rd Battalion, 513th Grenadier Regiment in the 294th Division was advancing with newfound exuberance. They had been a part of the southern pincer movement that had so bedeviled the Soviet 193rd Rifle Division, moving into the suburbs just north of the Red October Worker's Settlement. At one point, they became mixed in with units from the 24th Division to the south, but soon they found resistance slackening, the streets quiet and relatively empty. Sensing a trap, they probed cautiously for over an hour, then realized the enemy was simply not there.

"Come on men!" said Stumpfeld. "Let's get through to the rail line." The going was easy, the platoons and squads moving in quick dashes along the streets, and meeting only occasional resistance from a local with a hunting rifle or an old pistol. They pushed through a bombed out block, the victim of *Stuka* strikes the previous day, and were elated to find they had reached the main rail line that ran north towards the factory district from the Tennis Racquet.

They were now no more than two kilometers west of the Red October Factory, where Chuikov sat with his headquarters staff, and virtually no garrison of any kind. But there was a reason for that. Stumpfeld's Battalion had been noticed two hours earlier, and the garrison, the entire 39th Guards Regiment of the 13th Division, had fanned out and started moving west towards that rail line. They would soon be joined by two battalions of the 56th Tank Brigade, rushing north at Chuikov's behest.

The rumble of approaching armor finally dampened the spirits of the Grenadiers, metal demons grinding their way forward, impervious to rifle and MG fire. The tanks halted in the relatively open ground around the rail tracks, then the turrets turned, and they began blasting away at the buildings where Stumpfeld's men crouched low on defense. They remained stubbornly beyond the range of the few Panzerfausts the men had, and so the order was passed to begin withdrawing, house by house, so the battalion could get back into the urban area out of that merciless tank fire.

"Get on the radio," said Stumpfeld to the Lieutenant. "Tell them we've reached the rail line, but the enemy has brought up tanks. We need support."

They fell back through the bombed out block, where they made contact with German troops on their left, a battalion of the 24th Infantry that had become totally lost in the maze of narrow streets and was now separated from its division. It was already in a hot firefight with those Russian Guardsmen, and beyond their position the sound of artillery, machineguns and mortars rumbled to the north.

“Our boys are giving them hell up there,” said Stumpfeld. That was the Russian 193rd Rifle Division sector that they had been trying to encircle and destroy. “We ran them right out of bed in that worker’s settlement last night, and now they get no breakfast.”

His talk was covering over the stress of the battle; his fingers unsteady as he fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. Somehow those few minutes, leaning against a broken stone wall and smoking, restored his calm. He passed the butt off to the Lieutenant, who took it gratefully.

“Come on then, I want to see what the ground looks like on our right.” Stumpfeld peered over the wall, grateful the tanks had not followed them into the broken neighborhood, though he could hear the thrum of their engines in the distance. He stood up, and as he did so, he seemed to quiver, his legs twitching. Lieutenant Meyers looked up, and saw a hole in his forehead; then Stumpfeld simply keeled over and fell with a heavy thud.

“Hauptmann!” He instinctively reached for the other man, but he knew he was dead, and that he would soon be as cold as that heartless ground. So now Meyers was in charge of III Battalion, and after passing a moment to compose himself, he mirrored the sad work of ‘Graveyard Heintz,’ as the men of his division had come to call him. He had to search the pockets of his fallen officer and find maps, letters, anything that should not be left behind. Then he would call for two men to come up and get the man’s body. There was obviously a sniper out there somewhere, and he made a mental note about that cigarette. The smoke and aroma could have given their position away, and of course, like most really good officers, Stumpfeld always led from the front.

Angry, Meyers crawled back a safe distance, looking for the Battalion mortar teams. They had a good number of the small 5cm version, and several 8cm Granatwerfers. He wanted to put fire on the enemy to discourage any further attack, and those mortars were his only ranged firepower. When the men started dropping the shells into those tubes, his eyes narrowed. Payback,

he thought.

Snipers had a way of getting to a man like that. They sat out there somewhere in the broken buildings, as quiet and unseen as the death they brought to their enemies. But it was not the way Meyers wanted to die in battle. It seemed so inglorious. It was death by stealth and ambush, from an enemy that would not show his face. Yet that was just one private little slice of war. It wasn't the slashing maneuver of Balck's Panzer Regiment flanking his enemy when the Ghost Division appeared out of the morning mist like phantoms. There was no dash, or valor, or honor in that kind of a fight. It was war at its gritty heart, just men with rifles, in a haunted and broken city, creeping about from one blasted building to another trying to kill one another.

Stumpfeld's radio call had not gone unheeded. As sunset neared, he had friendly battalions to either side, and the enemy attack had been halted. The breakthrough his battalion had led, and the gap they had found, had just become a new wrinkle in the front, sealed off by the 39th Regiment of the Guards and those T-34s. One of the first things Lieutenant Meyers did was to take stock of what he had left. There were still 17 of the 27 squads the battalion had started with.

Penetrations like the one Stumpfeld had led his men into had the effect of forcing the enemy to adjust their lines. Most of the open country west of the city had been yielded to the enemy, and now the defenders were being compressed into the long flat stretch of the city itself. As they did so, the strength of that defense hardened. The first offensive blows of Thor's Hammer had beaten down the irregularities in the lines, but as it compressed, the metal on that anvil was beginning to show its strength.

Meyers had his satisfaction for the death of his commanding officer when he ordered that mortar barrage. But the Russians answered it with the heavy howitzers of their shore battery firing from the Metalworks in Petroleum Syndicate 1. Both sides could throw stones, but the rounds the Russians sent in literally shook the ground when they fell. Meyers and his men endured a five-minute pounding from four BR-18 305mm Howitzers. One squad position in a house a twenty yards to his left took a direct hit, and the structure just blew apart. When the dust and smoke settled, Meyers' squad count was down to 16.

* * *

“So now the real fighting begins,” said Shumilov. “The belly war. Our men will be crawling around in the rubble and snow from this point forward. And the front lines, if they can be called that, will be the floors between levels in any given house or building.”

“True,” said Chuikov. “City fighting is a special kind of fighting. Things are settled here not by strength, but by skill, resourcefulness and swiftness. The buildings in a city are like breakwaters. So we must hold firmly to strong buildings, and establish small garrisons in them capable of all around fire in case they become encircled. The fighting will go on in those buildings—for a cellar, for a room, for every corner is a corridor.” Those were words he would recall and write again in his memoirs after the war, at least in Fedorov’s history. Whether he would remember them in this recounting of events, or ever live to write them down, remained unsettled.

“Everything here is a matter of feet and yards now, not miles. We must wage a bitter fight for every house, workshop, water tower, railway embankment, wall, cellar and every pile of ruins. We have given them all the ground we can afford to yield.”

“What about Yelshanka?” said Shumilov. “I’ve got the better part of two divisions holding that, and 90 percent of that front is now being manned by Volkov’s dogs. Then the Germans bunched up, and they’ve been trying to cut through to the causeway near the Cannery for the last two days.”

“That is what they will continue to do,” said Chuikov. “They want to reach the Volga wherever they can, and cut our defense into smaller isolated pockets. But as long as we control the ferry sites, I can still move troops at night from one place to another. So it really doesn’t matter where we make a stand. One broken building is as good as another.”

Shumilov nodded. “What will become of it?” he asked. “Can Rokossovsky get through to us any longer?”

Chuikov smiled. “Have you looked at a map of the front lines to the north lately? The Germans pushed east of Voronezh before we finally stopped them. Then the line runs down along the Don towards the Chir now after Zhukov’s counteroffensive has ended. On the other side, the Volga reaches north, and Volkov controls the east bank there as far as Samara. The whole front line looks like a deep well, leading right here to Volgograd. And here we sit, like a pair of frogs at the bottom of that well, croaking at one another

in the night. No, Mikhail Stepanovich, Zhukov moved 13th Tank Corps behind 65th Army, but let us not fool ourselves. There will be no further counterattacks here to try and save us.”

“13th Tank Corps? What about the Shock Armies?”

“They are being pulled out. 65th and 66th Armies are extending their lines, and consolidating near the Don. Don’t you see? We’re too deep in that well. Anything Zhukov sends is just throwing good money after bad. What more will they do here? They threw four Shock Armies at the Germans—pushed all the way to Nizhne Chirskaya, but they could not hold that ground for more than two weeks. So here we will sit. We’ll both be named Heroes of the Soviet Union, and that will be that. Don’t expect any relief from the rest of the Army. The most we will get from here on out will be the grateful thanks of the nation.”

“Damn....” Shumilov swore quietly. “Now I regret yielding all that ground south of the Don. If we could have held Volkov back on the old fortification lines, then Zhukov’s attack would have had the SS in a bag for sure!”

“Which would have meant nothing,” said Chuikov. “You saw how quickly they broke through. They probably sent every reserve unit they had in the south to do so, but they stopped that last operation Zhukov mounted. What was it called? Saturn. Well, he’s running out of planets, isn’t he? So here we sit.”

“Then there will be no winter offensive?”

“Oh, I never said that. No, those Shock Armies must be going somewhere if they are pulling them north of the Don. And Steiner’s SS went somewhere too. They are in the Donbass now, and the Donets Basin. They want to clear that area, and take Rostov. We’re just a boil on their backside. That’s why they pulled out all but one of their really good divisions. But the fact that they left the Brandenburgers here is a very clear message.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they intend to take this city, stupid as that might seem. They wouldn’t leave a good division like that here unless they meant to finish the job. Hitler must have insisted on it. No General worth the name would put ten divisions into this mess, at least not willingly.”

“We put ten here,” said Shumilov.

“Which is why they put ten in—tit for tat.” Chuikov leaned back, running

his broad hand over that lion's mane of curly dark hair. The rumble of distant artillery fire intervened, and both men sat listening to it for some time.

"So then," said Shumilov at last. "We fight like the men in the Kirov Pocket fought, and like the 2nd Guards fought in Voronezh."

"Yes," said Chuikov, "and like the men in the Donets Basin and Rostov will fight, and after that the Army of the Kuban. All we are doing here is being stubborn. As long as we are here, then they need to leave those ten divisions here with us. So like I said, we fight now for every building—every room."

Shumilov nodded, but there was a vacant, empty look in his eyes. "How long can we hold, Vasily—not just here in the city, but out there?"

"Who knows? Zhukov is moving those Shock Armies, so he has something left up his sleeve. I think they will attack near Voronezh. That penetration all the way to Anna was quite alarming. If the Germans drive due east in the spring, they could go all the way to Saratov. Then everything in the well on that map will be yet another big pocket, three times the size of the Kirov Pocket. I don't think Zhukov can let that happen. So he must attack somewhere this winter to take the pressure off... Somewhere...."

He was going to attack somewhere, and right where Chuikov, not Manstein, had called it. In fact, the warning the German General put in during his last visit to OKH had been enough to prompt Hitler to strongly reinforce the Smolensk sector as part of the general redistribution of forces he had ordered. But every place strengthened was another place that had to be weakened. Army Group Don had been strongly reinforced to stop the orbits of Zhukov's planetary offensives. They had struck like successive blows, Mars was the spoiling attack, Uranus the daring drive to the Chir and into the Don Bend; then Saturn had even greater aspirations of breaking through between Tatsinskaya and Morozovsk to relieve the men trapped in the Donets Basin, but that hope was never realized.

Chuikov was correct, and now the offensive hopes would have to be directed elsewhere. His stoic nihilism had seen the whole of it, and he knew his fate was now to sit there and endure those hammer blows, to be the stubborn anvil, while the army fought elsewhere... Somewhere....

Zhukov was not quite done for the Winter of 1942. There were still planets orbiting in his mind, and the greatest of them he had saved for the last throw of the dice this year—Operation Jupiter.

Part XI

The Wrath of Jupiter

“Two Tigers of wrath are wiser than all the horses of instruction.”

— William Blake

Chapter 31

Nine mobile divisions had been extracted from the grand mailed fist the Germans had used to smash through at Voronezh. Six of them went first to Smolensk, where they joined with 4th Armee to launch a perfect spoiling attack against the Russian forces that had been gathering on that front as Manstein had predicted. It was a slow, but steady advance, for many of the divisions were still worn down from the long summer offensive. But the infantry there had been fresh, and it bore a good deal of the burden of attack in the heavily wooded area north of Smolensk. The Russians gave ground stubbornly, but Zhukov could see that his plan there had been discovered, and preempted.

Now he had other plans.

“Tank production has gone up considerably,” he explained to Kirov at the new STAVKA headquarters in Leningrad. “I have been getting good and very steady deliveries now that all our relocated factory equipment has been resettled to the east. We are building new formations at Kalinin, Yaroslavl, Novgorod and even Vologda in the far north. To the east, a new industrial city has been built, and we are calling it Kirovgrad, in honor of the city they already took from us.”

“Another city named for me?” said Kirov.

“This one is far enough to the northeast to worry about losing it. In fact, there was already a town at that site named after you. We just added the suffix when it became a city. 4th Guards Army is building there, and 2nd Guards is being re-established at Perm from veterans of the Volga Front. We are giving it to Malinovsky.”

“Then you are forming new Corps with all these tanks?”

“Of course, and several will be ready sooner than we expected. We expended the last of our front line reserves in those attacks to try and save Volgograd, but now I am pulling those shock Armies out.”

“To go where?”

“The closest place where they can make a difference—the Voronezh Front.”

“Then there will be no further effort to break through to the Donets

Basin?” Kirov leaned over the map, his eyes on the beleaguered formations still trapped in the south.

“Not unless you order it, but I would not advise it. You insisted on retaining that ground, and all those troops have been cut off as I told you they would be.”

“Why not take these new tank corps and smash through?”

Zhukov folded his arms. “Mister General Secretary... If I did that, and we did manage to get through Steiner’s SS Korps to make contact with those troops, what then? Will you order them out? Are you prepared to pull everything out of the Kuban now?”

Kirov’s face hardened.

“I didn’t think so,” said Zhukov. “We would waste ourselves trying to maintain that link, and it will be the subject of endless pincer attacks from east and west. That road leads us nowhere. So I have decided to move operations to the center of the board. The Germans had been carrying out a major redistribution of forces in the last month. They pulled no less than nine mobile divisions out of that bunch they had east of Voronezh., and that was what spoiled our planned Smolensk Operation. That leaves six left in the 2nd Panzer Armee under Model near Voronezh, and now that sector is ripe for counterattack.”

“What do you propose?” Any mention of a possible offensive always got Kirov’s attention.

“An offensive to either side of Voronezh, and with the aim of trapping and isolating the 2nd Panzer Army. To do this I have extended the lines of 66th, 65th and 24th Armies. They now hold the ground gained by our earlier offensives. All the Shock Armies have been pulled out. In fact, this redeployment has been underway for a month, all while Steiner moved back west of the Don and then crossed the Donets to attack towards Rostov. They will take that city, and we must be grimly resigned to that. But... while the cat is away, the mice will play.”

“But surely they will have seen this redeployment,” said Kirov. “They will react, just as they did at Smolensk.”

“They may, but their own plans did not factor this option into their thinking. For that I credit your stubbornness in the south. We have learned that a Führer Directive has compelled General Manstein to continue operating there.”

“Berzin?”

“We just got it this morning,” said the Intelligence Chief. “Führer Directive Number 46. Manstein has orders to reduce Volgograd, take Rostov, clear the Donets Basin and then prepare for operations in the Kuban by January.”

“You see?” said Kirov, somewhat indignantly. “There was good reason to hold all that ground. They want it. The Kuban is the most natural land bridge linking Volkov’s Forces with German operations. All the really well developed oil sites are there at Maykop, Grozny and Baku. Hitler wants easy and unfettered access to that oil, and my Kuban Front armies are in the way.”

“For the moment,” said Zhukov. “They won’t have the armor to stop Steiner’s SS Korps, but any defense they do make will buy us the time we need at Voronezh. A little cloak and dagger from Berzin will hopefully help us as well.”

“What do you mean? Grishin?” Kirov looked to Berzin now.

“I had a little sit down with the Commissars. Afterwards I spoke with Khrushchev and told him we were determined to go forward with some offensive in the western sector, if not at Smolensk, then on the line from there to Moscow, aimed at Vyazma, Mozhaysk, and possibly as far as Kirov. I told him the Siberians were being pulled out of the south for redeployment to that front. Then I gave him specific orders to fly to the 11th Reserve Army headquarters at Kalinin and shake things up. Bridging equipment is also being moved to that sector.”

“Nikita Khrushchev,” said Kirov, almost spitting out the words. “We have long suspected he was a leftover from Beria’s regime,” he said to Zhukov. “So then we are gambling that news of these preparations will get to Volkov somehow, and from him to the Germans. “

“Correct,” said Berzin. “If they believe it, it will mask the withdrawal of those shock armies. Once we get them north of the Don again, we will put out that lack of adequate transport is slowing down the redeployment, and that the operation must be postponed another week. This will hopefully suppress any questions about why they are still lingering north of Boguchar and Veshenskaya.”

“Then I’m sending them west,” said Zhukov, pointing at the Don bend. “Right at Rossosh. That is the breakthrough point for the southern wing of the offensive. Once through we have the option of either turning north behind

Model's Army, or simply pushing west and south to Kharkov."

"And the northern wing?"

"6th Army has reformed at Tambov and I will hurl it right at Lipetsk on the river, and they will have more than a little help. Volsky's 4th Mech is heading there, again with cover orders that he is going up around Moscow for the Kalinin Group ruse. And you once asked me where all our tank corps were. Well, they were mostly rebuilding; receiving all these new tanks I spoke of at the outset of this briefing. I have now placed 11th Tank Corps at Tambov with the 6th Army, 2nd Tank Corps at Morshansk, 3rd on the line north of Voronezh, 5th at Penza in deep reserve. Beyond that, all of 1st Shock Army is still in the Tula sector reserve now, and it can be moved south to support this attack. Altogether, this will be the largest offensive of the war for us, even bigger than last winter."

"Amazing," said Kirov, very glad to hear all this. "Not two months ago you told me we could barely scrape up the forces to mount those attacks in the south."

"That was true then," said Zhukov. "The good thing about those attacks is that we did not get hurt too badly. We lost one Guards rifle corps, a few more run of the mill divisions, and those two tank corps. That was the only real sting, but we'll rebuild them. As for the Shock Armies, they remain in very good shape. They've had over a month to rest and refit, and in that interval a lot of formations that were building in rear areas have now become available. What I told you the last time we met was true, but remember, the enemy has pulled nine tank divisions off the line and sent them to the northern front. They did not think we had the strength to attack with what we already had in the field, but they were wrong. Now, with the arrival of these new tank Corps, I have the forces to proceed."

"Yes, Factory 100 in Leningrad has been working around the clock," said Kirov. "Yet don't you think we're asking a lot of the Siberians?"

"And they are giving it to us," said Zhukov. "Karpov sent us a big group he had assembled at Perm. I did everything but beg him for more support, and he delivered. Those men went right back into the ranks of those five Shock Armies, and they will be ready. Yet I do not think we can go to the well there again. There is a limit to the manpower Siberia can provide us. We must raise more troops, even if we have to conscript the entire population of Leningrad. Because if this operation fails, then that is where they will come

next—Leningrad. They have already redeployed those tank divisions I mentioned north of Smolensk. They joined the three others they sent north of Minsk.”

Kirov nodded. “For Leningrad,” he said. “They couldn’t break our china at Moscow, and they are still trying to smash what’s left in the cupboards by taking Volgograd and everything to the south. Now it is high time that we started throwing cups and plates around ourselves. General Zhukov, get after them. Launch this operation as soon as you deem it feasible, and keep me well informed. By the way, what will you call it this time, Pluto?”

“For the largest offensive of the war?” Zhukov shook his head. Pluto is but a barren rock, or so I am told. Neptune would be better, but it is cold and blue. So this time they will feel the wrath of red Jupiter.” He smiled. “Isn’t he the Roman god of sky and thunder, king of all the other gods?”

“Why General,” said Kirov. “I did not know you were a religious man.”

The meeting ended on a high note, and a very hopeful one. At last the relocation of the factories had taken root. The output was up, and they were producing more tanks, more planes and trucks. The slogging Red Army was finally getting more motorized, and while those forces were in no way as skilled as Germany’s Panzer Divisions, the Soviets were building more and more each month. The sheer mass of the army was daunting to any foe that contemplated battle.

That young man warned me of this long ago, thought Kirov—Fedorov. I wonder what has become of him these days? When I boasted that we already had 500 of the new T-34s back in the summer of 1941, he told me I would have to build 50,000. Now we are finally scaling up production to do that, and to build better tanks as well.

When Zhukov had departed for the front, Kirov sat with Berzin before a warming fire. “Well this is all new,” he said, “and most unexpected.”

“Yes, we are well outside the covers of that last book I saved,” said Berzin. “There was no Operation Jupiter, but I think the Saturn Operation in the Material achieved its goals.”

“So we trade one god for another,” said Kirov, “or one planet. Was Zhukov holding all this force back? Why didn’t he report the progress of these new formations during the last briefing?”

“I think he likes to keep his cards held close to his vest,” said Berzin. “From an intelligence perspective, we knew they were building, but only he

can say when they are ready for operations, and he can be very tight lipped. I suppose that can be a beneficial trait.”

“For heaven’s sake. I’m the General Secretary. I should have been informed.”

“Perhaps he was telling the truth. Two months ago, none of these new formations were ready. Now they are, and that is all we need be thankful for.”

“Did you catch that business about the shift of those German tank divisions to the line of the Divina River?”

“I was aware of that. They tried to make it look like they were part of the staging for their Smolensk cleanup operation, but I could see more in those deployments. Zhukov was correct. It’s Leningrad they want next year—old Saint Petersburg. If we don’t beat them up badly enough this winter, then this is where they will attack next. The decisive battle could be fought right here.”

Kirov reached for a bottle of vodka, pouring two glasses. “You know,” he continued, “I was once warned not to come here—to Leningrad, and by that same man I mentioned a moment ago—Fedorov.”

“You have told me this before, yet in all honesty, I still have difficulty grasping what happened to you at Ilanskiy. That place is still there, the same railway inn. Are you still thinking about it?”

“Of course—it is always in the back of my mind. Yet who knows if the phenomenon I described to you still persists. 1908 was a very long time ago.”

“Perhaps,” said Berzin. “Yet the thought that a man could go there by simply taking a walk down that stairway is most unnerving. I wonder what that Russian Captain was doing there a while back? Yes, I know, I’m not supposed to wonder about things. I’m Chief of Soviet Intelligence, and I should already know. Well, no one is infallible. It has also occurred to me that the Germans might know about that place. Perhaps that was the reason they were so eager to lend Volkov all those transport planes.”

“They did him no good,” said Kirov. “No, Grishin, I think Ilanskiy is the one secret Volkov keeps tight. He certainly must know about it, as that is how he came to be here. But would he tell Hitler this? I think not. Power is power as long as you can keep it in your back pocket, and use it when necessary—like this nice big offensive Zhukov pulls out of his hat. Let us hope it takes us farther than his spoiling attacks. Volgograd was the really big victory for us in late 1942, at least according to the Material. I had hopes that something similar might be achieved with Uranus and Saturn, and when they

reached the Don, and cut Steiner's Korps off like that, I was holding my breath. I thought time would twist these events into an image of the history we have in that book, but it was not to be."

"There was no southern pincer," said Berzin. "Shumilov is penned up in the city with Chuikov, and the other armies that attacked from that direction are on the upper Volga. It wasn't the same at all, so why should we expect a similar outcome?"

"Could this be it then, this Operation Jupiter?"

"We can't know that. It isn't anything we can read up on in the Material any longer. Now we live it day by day, and try to make the best we can of it. I will say one thing. I'm glad you have finally given up the strange notion you had in your head about trying to end this war at that railway inn."

"Thanks to you, Grishin, my strong right arm. I would be dead already if not for you." Kirov thought about that, for he knew exactly why that Russian Captain had been at Ilanskiy, and he knew that the strange magic that happened on that stairway still persisted.

Yes, Grishin was correct about one thing, he thought. I have finally discarded the notion of trying to end this war on that back stairway, and I think that Russian Captain has as well. No, we must win it ourselves, the hard way, with blood, fire, and steel, and we *can* win. That was what Fedorov was trying to tell me all those years ago. We *can* win.

He turned to Berzin, a smile on his face.

"Let us drink, and wait for news of this battle. And God go with our soldiers this winter, be he Jupiter, Mars, Saturn or anyone else with a claim to the heavenly throne."

"I think the Politburo will have to weigh in on that first," said Berzin, raising his vodka glass.

Chapter 32

By the 15th of December, the German redeployment was almost complete, and the divisions were settling in to their winter rebuilding cycle. Three Panzer Korps, (41st, 56th and 57th), of three divisions each, had been sent west. They now formed Hoth's new 4th Panzer Armee, refitting in preparation for the Spring Offensive. Most were understrength, needing new equipment and troops, and it would take some time to flesh them out. Model was left with six divisions, three each in the 24th and 47th Panzer Korps.

The 46th Panzer Korps was pulled into reserve at Kharkov with three more divisions. But with reports of a buildup underway at Kalinin northwest of Moscow, preparations were being made to send that Korps to Vyazma, where the Germans thought they would kill two birds with one stone. If the Soviets were planning a winter attack west of Moscow, then that Korps would be perfectly placed to stop it. If nothing developed, it would still be well placed to participate in the Spring Offensive. It was never once contemplated that the Russians would strike where they did.

Quite coincidentally, three infantry divisions, the 205th, 218th and 246th, had remained in the Voronezh area after the final reduction of that pocket. Now they were being moved up to the line to relieve the 10th Panzergrenadier Division, which withdrew into a second echelon position in accordance with the German sword and shield defensive doctrine. They wanted infantry on the line, and the mobile divisions behind, and this change was taking place east of Voronezh just as the Russians began moving up to their jump off start lines for the offensive. A fourth infantry division from reserve, the 707th, was coming in on the morning train from Kursk. This was going to considerably bolster the defensive arc around Voronezh.

In the meantime, Steiner's SS Korps fell like a storm on the defenders north of Rostov. They had a brief reprieve when Manstein had recalled Balck's 11th Panzer and other units to hold the line of the Chir against Operations Uranus and Saturn. The Soviet defense south of the Donets was soon reduced to two small areas, one around the big industrial city of Donetsk, the other at Rostov. Neither would hold for very much longer.

Then the thunder rolled, and Jupiter began to awaken from his long

slumber. A huge segment of the German line, from Serpukhov all the way south to Rossosh, now saw a sudden buildup of enemy activity. The kicker that something very unusual was up came when the first Guard Airborne was airlifted over the front south of Tula, to drop on Plavsk and cut the rail line there.

Shortly thereafter, telephones were ringing in the headquarters of 2nd Panzer Armee at Voronezh, Army Group Center at Kirov, and at Army Group Don at Morozovsk. The enemy had crossed the Don south of Rossosh, and the bridgehead at Boguchar had launched what looked to be a pinning attack against the 44th Infantry Division there. 168th and 56th Infantry to the north on the river east of Rossosh reported a considerable buildup, including numerous tank formations and bridging equipment. Then the two newly arrived infantry divisions, the 208th and 218th, both reported they had come under sudden heavy artillery bombardment, followed by a strong attack.

The 707th Reserve Division had just arrived from Kursk, badly under strength. It was nonetheless sent forward, and the men of 10th Panzergrenadier had only just settled into their reserve posting when the orders came that the division was returning to the front line. The other division that had been relieved, 3rd Panzer, was also back in action within the hour.

The initial assessment was that these were spoiling attacks, aimed at harassing the Germans and hindering their scheduled redeployments, but that river crossing operation near Rossosh got Manstein's attention. He wanted to know more, and got on the phone to OKH to see what Halder knew.

"What word from that attack near Rossosh?"

"Keitel suggests it is no more than an attempt to enlarge their Bridgehead at Boguchar. At the moment, it is contained."

"Contained by what?"

"360th Security Division is in Rossosh itself, and reports no enemy activity. 4th Luftwaffe Field Division has moved south of the town. That's where the trouble is."

"4th Luftwaffe Field Division? They can't contain anything, particularly a heavy infantry attack."

"Don't worry. I've ordered the 167th Infantry up from Kharkov. It will be there late tomorrow."

"Well isn't there a panzer division available?"

“The nearest would be 17th Panzer, a hundred kilometers north and east of the Don.”

“Good lord,” said Manstein.

“Well don’t you have something at Millerovo?” Halder sounded like he was fishing.

“22nd Panzer is there, but again, that is nearly 150 kilometers to the south.”

“47th Panzer Korps has their 29th Motorized Division in reserve,” Halder replied. “General Lemelsen was going to send them out on an anti-partisan sweep. I could call them, that is unless you prefer to send the 22nd.”

“I think we had better send both divisions.” Manstein sounded concerned. “If it’s a spoiling attack, then all we do is waste a little gasoline. Yet they are crossing the river at a most unusual place, right at the seam between my command and Model’s. If it is something more....”

“Very well. I will get orders off to Model, and then the two of you can coordinate things. How is the Donets Basin Operation?”

“Coming along nicely. We’ll take Donetsk today. Steiner is outside Rostov now, and it is not as heavily defended as Volgograd was. I have ordered him to take the city, and we already have infantry over the Donets to the east.”

“The Führer will be pleased. You are two weeks ahead of schedule.”

“I’m sure he will. But Halder... Keep an eye on this. Things have been quiet, and we presumed they had played out all their trump cards in that Chir operation. They pulled out those Shock Armies, and things got even quieter.”

“We received intelligence that they are being moved up around Moscow to the Kalinin sector,” said Halder.

“Yes... I read that too. But what if they aren’t going there? What if they rolled them into a new offensive plan? We will speak again on this. Notify me if you learn anything more.”

Three hours after that phone call the entire front in the Rossosh sector erupted. Every division on the line was under heavy attack, forced into hedgehog defense and calling frantically for armor support. The ‘something more’ Manstein could smell on the cold December wind was becoming much bigger than anyone imagined.

In the sector that had been fought over so bitterly since Guderian’s offensive of 1941, the Soviets threw 16th and 38th Armies supported by two

tank corps at Tula. There the German 110th Infantry was overrun, the 183rd shattered and falling back with the 197th retreating on its right. Tula fell late on the 16th, and the Soviet armor surged through openings created by the retreating German infantry and raced for the Oka River. There the 214th Tank Brigade forced a crossing at Alexin, where nothing more than a small contingent of German military police barred the way.

Just beyond the bridge, a train had arrived from the Kalinin sector, and the men of the 389th infantry disembarked as the enemy tanks appeared. The infantry rushed forward, panzerfaust teams being the only immediate AT defense, and bravely engaged the enemy armor while the engineers desperately backed the train off to avoid having the rolling stock shot to pieces. The 387th division had disembarked some miles back, and it was now coming up on the right, which gave the Germans a critical mass of decent infantry to stop that enemy thrust and organize a counterattack to try and eliminate this bridgehead. Everything else east of the Oka was ordered back over the river.

Further south, the Russians took Plavsk, and had a fast moving cavalry division approaching Mtsensk by the 18th. Behind it, a long column of tanks and AFVs in the 3rd Guard Mech Corps was pushing for Orel. That was there the water was spilling over the top of the dam, for far to the east, the German line stretched in a wide arc like a great shield, down to the upper Don, to the position beyond Voronezh, and then down to the Don Bend area near Rossosh and the enemy Boguchar Bridgehead. It was all the hard won territory Rundstedt had taken in the Summer Offensive, and now the question arose as to whether any of that ground could be held.

The stubborn defense of the German 12th Infantry Korps had held Lipetsk for three days, completely throwing off Zhukov's timetable for a crossing of the Don there. He had a lot of force on the roads stretching all the way back to Tambov. To the south, Model's defense in front of Voronezh was masterful, with the 24th Panzer Korps mounting timely counterattacks in a very active battle. 3rd Panzer held onto Anna until the 18th, when Model consolidated his positions, ordering it back.

Model notified Halder that Voronezh was in no immediate danger, but requested more mobile support. "This is what happens when you pull nine divisions out of the army and leave us with the bare necessity. I had to put all six panzer divisions on the line. Where did all that infantry go after we took

Voronezh?”

“Ten divisions went to Manstein. The Führer is goggle eyed to smash the last of the enemy resistance in the south, particularly at Volgograd. And you know very well that the panzers were shifted to Armeegruppe Nord.”

“Volgograd? That’s useless! We don’t need it.”

“From a military standpoint, you are certainly correct, but there are political considerations. Hitler wants it, Volkov wants it even more.”

“Well it is no concern of mine,” said Model. “Aside from the fact that all that infantry could be put to better use elsewhere.”

“Particularly in the north,” said Halder. “They are rolling us back to the Oka, so your northern flank will be turned in a matter of days. Screen Voronezh as long as you can. I have sent the three divisions of 46th Panzer Korps, and three more infantry divisions, to see if we can at least slow them down in the north, but they are already approaching Mtsensk.”

“Do you know the price in blood we paid for that sector? What about Tula?”

“It was occupied two days ago. Your army is the only segment of the front still intact. The Führer is counting on you, but you should know there is a big breakthrough at Rossosh to the south, so they may be contemplating a pincer operation, with your forces in the middle.”

“I can’t do anything about that,” said Model. “Frankly, if they break through there, then I think they want Kharkov.”

“Manstein isn’t sure about that, but it will be his problem. In the meantime, stand firm. I’ll get you all the support I can.”

For once Manstein was inwardly glad that it was Halder scrimping for infantry and other reserves. He had raided the cupboard fairly well in recent months, pulling Steiner’s SS out of Volgograd and collecting ten infantry divisions there. Now the earlier theft of 14th Panzer Korps also paid him good dividends. It was his first reaction force against the Boguchar bridgehead attack, stabilizing and shoring up the southern shoulder. Yet the enemy did not want to turn in his direction, and he inwardly sensed that.

They tried me in those earlier offensives, he thought, and they know I have all of Steiner’s divisions at hand to stop any further attempt they make against the lines of communication to Volgograd. Here I am, securing that ground when it is needless to do so. We should have just yielded the city to Volkov and let him deal with it, but I think Hitler is thinking beyond this

battle to the end of the war. The political reasons he mentions involve our control of the lower Volga after the war, and that is why Volkov want that city.

The campaign in the Donets Basin is now concluded. Donetsk fell last night, which leaves me ten more divisions in the 17th Armee that will be looking for work. Hitler's expectation was that I would take Steiner's Korps into the Kuban, but I wonder if that would be wise given the scope of this big enemy offensive. I think Hitler wants the Kuban for the same reasons he wanted Volgograd. If he can get direct control of the oil there, all the better, and he knows Volkov is waiting to occupy that entire area after we break the enemy defense. Steiner would get the job done faster, but I could just as easily send Rouff's 17th Army into the Kuban. It has the mountain divisions, and good artillery. So I have decided. Steiner moves north, Rouff south.

As for this offensive, what exactly are the Russians up to here? This drive out of Boguchar looks like they want Kharkov, but they still would have two rivers to get over before they could threaten that city. Turning north and aiming for Kursk might serve them better. Those same rivers would cover their left flank, and such a thrust would be the southern pincer against Model's 2nd Panzer Armee. This is what I think they are doing, which means Kharkov must be occupied by a strong Knight.

Manstein was already looking several moves ahead, beyond the winter, to the spring counteroffensive that would surely answer this impudent attack by the enemy. It would not take him long before he determined just where he would find that strong Knight. He turned to a staffer, waving him over.

"Herr General?"

"Get me General Steiner on the telephone. I have new orders for him." Manstein would soon learn that Steiner had delivered Rostov as he promised, and Steiner would soon learn that in grateful thanks, his SS Panzer Korps was going into reserve for a much needed refit—at Kharkov.

Orel fell on December 19th, but strangely, the Russian mobile units then turned almost due south and did not persist west towards the large industrial center of Bryansk. While Model had skillfully refused his northern left flank, the Russian attack kept trying to flow around it. At the same time, as if on cue, the southern group of forces that had broken out of the Boguchar Bridgehead abandoned their westward drive towards Kharkov and turned northwest.

Manstein received the reports with a knowing nod of his head, for the Northern attack had forsaken Bryansk and Kirov when it turned south. Both groups were now heading for another city that had become famous in the war, where another great turning point battle had once been fought.

The Russians were heading for Kursk, and if they could meet there, all of the 2nd Panzer Armee would be sitting in the largest German pocket to form since the battle for Moscow in the winter of 1941.

Chapter 33

On the night of December 20, 1942, the leading unit in the Northern Group of Forces came to a halt just outside the frozen airstrip on the outskirts of Kursk. 20th Guard Tank Brigade was leading the 5th Guard Tank Corps south, eager to be the first to reach the assigned objective of Operation Jupiter. This northern pincer had every reason to claim bragging rights. It had broken through at Tula and then raced just over 185 miles in the first five days of the offensive, an average of 37 miles per day.

In Poland, the German Panzers had advanced at an average rate of 11 miles per day, and in Barbarossa they improved this to about 19 miles per day. So this lightning quick movement of a heavy mechanized force was quite astonishing, for both the Russians and Germans alike. By contrast, the Southern Group of Forces had advanced about 100 miles, or still a respectable 25 miles per day. They had faced defensive opposition the entire time, while the northern pincer had done little more than broken field running after the fall of Orel and that fateful turn to the south.

In spite of this achievement, the bag was far from closed on Model's 2nd Panzer Armee. The Southern pincer was still 125 miles from Kursk, so Zhukov gave orders that the Northern Group should continue south towards Belgorod. That route would take them through an insignificant town with a name that also rang through Fedorov's history, Prokhorovka.

Model realized the significance of what was happening, and while his inclination was to make a rapid withdrawal towards Kharkov, the volatile Adolf Hitler had exploded when he got news of the Russian offensive. With Both Tula and Orel now in enemy hands, Bryansk threatened, Voronezh and the lines north and south under heavy pressure, he issued one of his infamous stand fast orders, forbidding Model to withdraw. In effect, he was insisting that 2nd Panzer Armee stay in the trap the enemy was laboring so hard to close. For Hitler, the loss of Voronezh was unconscionable, the fruit of all that effort in the German Summer Offensive now about to be spoiled. He issued another Führerbefehl that demanded the city be defended to the last man, and the last bullet.

Model complained bitterly to von Rundstedt. "I still have nine divisions

east of the Don! They will have that river behind them, no good bridges, and only two suitable crossing points where I can move in supply. The ice is thickening, but it still can't take the weight of the tanks, and we will have to build pontoon bridges to cross that obstacle, coming or going. Beyond that, Kursk is virtually undefended, as is Kharkov. They can waltz in and take those cities for the cost of the petrol!"

"I understand everything you are saying," said von Rundstedt. "But I cannot allow you to withdraw west of the Don. The Führer has forbidden any such movement. As for Kharkov, Manstein is seeing to that. I don't know what is happening at Kursk yet, but it will be Halder's problem."

"Do you realize that if they get behind me I have nothing to send to that sector? It is all I can do to hold the line as it is. We remain under very heavy pressure."

"They knew they had to lean on you heavily," said von Rundstedt. "They needed to keep you engaged to prevent the exact same kind of sensible withdrawals you are now proposing."

"Well we could have saved them the trouble," said Model, the anger apparent in his voice. "Hitler has seen to that for them. Do you have any idea what Halder is sending for Kursk?"

"Not at the moment. There has been some discussion about returning some of the divisions that were moved to *Armeegruppe Nord*, but that will take some doing."

"Then I certainly hope Manstein has something in his pocket. God help us if he doesn't act swiftly."

Manstein did have something in his pocket. He had General Felix Martin Julius Steiner, four SS Divisions and the *Reichsführer Brigade*. That was the first unit to go, but the trains did not stop at Kharkov. Manstein told them to move right on up to Belgorod. The 5th SS Wiking Division was next in line, with three infantry regiments, and another of tanks that had been inherited from the Brandenburg Division. Yet that was all that could be moved that day with the available rolling stock, including the tanks of the 502 SS *Schwerepanzer* Battalion. General Gille's Wikings were told to assemble at Volchansk, southeast of Belgorod. The only other things that moved were some massive siege guns dubbed Karl and Dora, both bound for Volgograd.

Frustrated and angry, Model took a chance and ordered the 41st Regiment of 3rd Panzergrenadier Division to go to Kursk. It arrived at dusk, just as the

Russian tankers were lining up on the frozen airfield north of the city. The place would soon become a magnet for steel, with forces on every side of the compass bearing down on the city, and using every road or rail that led to that place.

Behind that leading tank brigade was a torrent of mechanized corps, formations that had been building in reserve areas for most of the second half of 1942. Zhukov had held the line with the rifle divisions, losing more and more ground to the Germans in the summer and autumn of their offensive. Operation Blue had been a great success, and with it they had largely destroyed the old Red Army they had first engaged in 1941. The survivors formed the nucleus of new divisions, like a hard nut in the center of the fruit, and new conscripts fleshed out the peach.

Now, by late 1942, it was an all-new Red Army, more heavily motorized, better equipped, and now with hordes of fast new proven tanks. They were still outclassed by the better German designs. The old T-34 shock had long since been dispelled by the arrival of the Big Cats, and by men like Kurt Knispel and Hermann Balck who knew how to use those tanks. But now the Russians finally had mass in their mobile formations, the force to challenge the German panzers on almost equal terms, though a single German division would be the equal of a Soviet Tank Corps.

Zhukov's fast moving Guards Mech Corps reached Kursk in great strength on the morning of the 21st of December, and when Model received the report from that one Panzergrenadier regiment he had sent there, he ordered it to get out while it still could.

Halder was at his wits end. His immediate reaction to the crisis was to reach for all the divisions that had been sent to Armeegruppe Nord, but he realized that most had been badly depleted during the long summer offensive, and much of their equipment was left behind to build up the divisions Model retained. It would be at least another month before any of them were fit for combat, and to use them now would only court their complete destruction.

His first and greatest need, however, was for more infantry to reform the ruptured front line. In the north, the line along the Oka was secure, and no longer under attack. That had obviously been a chosen stopping point for the offensive there. Model's army was still holding, yet in grave danger of being cut off and pocketed. Manstein was secure in the south, but a lot of infantry had gone there, and now the entire 17th Army was pushing south of the Don

for the Kuban Operation.

The danger zone was near Kursk, where strong enemy mobile forces had arrived in great strength. He had a division left in Prague, another in Warsaw, and then went looking as far away as Wein in Austria for more troops. Then, and without even informing Hitler, He quietly ordered the Baltic coast garrison division at Memel to board the trains, replacing it with a security regiment. He did the same for the 290th Infantry Division, a reserve unit behind the 10th Infantry Korps in Latvia.

All these divisions joined those of Army Group Center's reserve, moving by rail to the region southwest of Kursk. He then looked for a headquarters, and tapped Hans von Salmuth and the 2nd Army, which had been withdrawn into OKW reserve for possible assignment to the Leningrad operation in the spring. He needed it now.

By raiding these far off pantries, Halder had cobbled together a new army that would soon have all of ten infantry divisions. Knowing it would soon be facing a lot of enemy armor, he then ordered in several of the Schwerepanzer Brigades that were still in the German order of Battle, refitted after the heated action of 1941. The 106th and 107th Brigades would be the first to arrive, having been in reserve for Army Group Center. There were five more behind Army Group Nord, and he stole away the 105th from its reserve posting near Minsk, again saying nothing to Hitler about this. Finally, he called Manstein and asked if there was anything more he could spare. Knowing he had a few debts to pay for his own larceny, Manstein immediately detached the 60th Panzergrenadier Division and ordered it to Prokhorovka.

When Hitler learned that the enemy had already reached Kursk, he was fuming himself up into a tirade when Halder walked in, determined to try his own hand at being a miracle worker.

"Do not be overly concerned," he began. "Yes, this is a serious setback, but it will be managed."

"Managed? I see nothing on the map there at all? What is to stop the Russians from going all the way to Kharkov? I should have Rundstedt taken out and shot!"

"Not yet please," said Halder, reaching for a pen. Then he simply leaned over the map table and began sketching in a defensive line, from a point near Orel and running south parallel to the enemy line of advance on Kursk before jogging east towards Prokhorovka. To save von Rundstedt's head, he decided

to give him the credit.

“There,” he said. “Von Rundstedt is now assembling his reserve 2nd Armee under von Salmuth. And from the South front, their operation at Rostov concluded, Manstein is sending the entire SS Panzer Korps. Steiner is coming, my Führer. You can be assured he will deal with this situation in short order.”

“Steiner?” Hitler brushed the hair from his brow, his other hand hidden behind his back, the one with the palsied tremor that became worse whenever he was agitated. “I thought he was in the Kuban?”

“Manstein saw fit to pull him out, and Rouff’s 17th Army will now do the job there. They have already crossed the Don and are south of Rostov... about here I expect.”

Hitler lean in, squinting. “And where is Steiner?”

“He will assemble here, near Belgorod. It will put him in a perfect position to stop the enemy pincer operation. It would be better, of course, if Model could use his 47th Panzer Korps to strike this southern pincer from the east while Steiner crushes it from the west. Unfortunately, due to your stand fast order, that will not be possible. A pity, because this stretch of river here has only a very few decent crossing points, and Model now has it at his back. If he were on the west bank, he could hold that line with far fewer troops, and then use his panzers to attack. As it stands, there they sit, and likely for some time. A shame to see those divisions stuck east of the river like that. They were all fattened up nicely with the equipment from the other divisions we sent to Armee Group Nord.”

“Who ordered those panzers to remain east of that river?” Hitler gave Halder an indignant look. “Get them out of there immediately! Move them to assist Steiner, just as you have described it to me a moment ago. After he smashes this southern pincer, then both forces will turn north and smash the other.” He took the pencil from Halder’s hand, leaning to draw an arrow on the map, as if this whole scheme had been his design all along.

“A much better use of those divisions,” said Halder. “I have no idea who gave that order, but I will see that it is corrected immediately.” He looked at Keitel, who nodded and then quickly withdrew to get the order off to Model before Hitler changed his mind.

“But remember,” said Hitler, “Voronezh will be held. You will make certain of that.”

“Model has posted three infantry divisions there,” said Halder.

The sudden appearance on the map of a complete army that had not been there before had been a balm to Hitler, and his mood had quieted. Yet there was still a restless sense of urgency about him, and he looked about him as if the other officers had stolen something from him, slipping it back into the living room while he wasn't looking. The threat to the hard won gains of the long summer gave him great anxiety. He had hoped that offensive would finally break his enemy, and now, seeing the Russians still had the strength to mount such an attack, was most unnerving.

On the 22nd, Kursk was firmly in the enemy's hands, though the southern pincer had made only 20 kilometers progress against a stubborn by hopeless defense put up by the 29th Panzergrenadier Division. Only a hundred kilometers now separated the two pincers, and while elated that he was finally given permission to extract the 47th Panzer Korps, the order had come only in the nick of time for Model. Getting back over that river would not be easy, and the engineers were the first units to move, given any transport they needed.

“Get them to the crossing sites and prepare pontoons,” Model told his Chief of Staff. “The rest of the Korps will follow as soon as we can disengage, which may not be easy.”

* * *

“Then we will not take Kharkov?” Sergei Kirov was in high spirits, and to think that he now had that option before him was something he still struggled to realize.

“First things first,” said Zhukov. “Rokossovsky was a little slow with the southern pincer, so I have adjusted the planned meeting point for both groups to this town here, Prokhorovka. That puts the enemy 2nd Tank Army in the bag, and after that we will have a massive mailed fist to turn southwest towards Kharkov. Yet I propose a double thrust. Rokossovsky is going to be reinforced by the addition of 3rd Shock Army and all the mechanized forces assigned to it. They were east of Voronezh, but the Germans have finally come to their senses and started falling back towards the river. It makes no sense to leave those shock troops there. Once they redeploy south through Pavlovsk they can approach the upper Donets. This will leave the forces

presently constituting that group free to drive on Kharkov.”

“And the other thrust?”

“Timoshenko’s Northern Group could reorient and drive on Bryansk, but that would see both forces taking divergent paths. My judgment would be to let them continue southwest, with the River Desna on their right.”

“Kiev?” Kirov was amazed. “I had no idea that might be within our reach this soon.”

“It may not be. Logistics will be very difficult, and we must have Kharkov first. I have surged supply deliveries to keep the mobile troops moving, but we cannot do that indefinitely. In any case, if we send Timoshenko in that direction, it would cover the flank of the Southern Group as it advances on Kharkov, and also be available to support that attack should Kiev prove to be an impractical objective, as it likely will.”

“Agreed,” said Kirov, literally rubbing his hands with anticipation. “Just getting Kharkov back again would be a great victory,” he said. “We have lost Rostov and the entire Donets Basin. Volgograd cannot be far behind. Yet in compensation we will get Voronezh and Kharkov.”

“That is the plan,” said Zhukov, though we have neither at the moment. Getting to Kursk this quickly is certainly noteworthy, but by now the enemy will be pulling in every reserve they have to try and stop us. Word is that the SS Korps is being moved north.”

“That is correct,” said Berzin. “They moved the 5th SS Division two days ago, and smaller corps assets. The 3rd SS is beginning to arrive now.”

“So you see why I have decided to reinforce Rokossovsky’s Southern Group. What we could use now is one more army to assure we don’t thin out too much as we move south. 3rd Guards Army is up near Samara, but I plan no offensive action there for some time.”

“Then move it here,” said Kirov. “We’ll deal with Volkov later. I want everything we can muster here for this offensive, and it still amazes me that you suddenly have all these armies available when only two months ago you were telling me your Operation Uranus was everything you had saved for this winter offensive.”

“It was,” said Zhukov. “That is where these shock armies in the Southern Group came from. The new mobile formations were a long time building, and 60 days ago I could not use any of them as they were being formed. They were only just starting to build up their brigades with good armor deliveries.

Now we have them, and so now we will use them. Mister General Secretary, I have every hope to take Kharkov within 30 days.”

“What about the SS? What about all those new German Tiger tanks? They have been a real nemesis.”

“The SS? Tiger tanks? Not this time. The forces I have assembled in these two shock groups are massive. We have two tigers of our own out there, Timoshenko and Rokossovsky, about to meet and be harnessed to Jupiter’s mighty chariot. And if Steiner gets in my way, I will deliver his head on a platter.”

Part XII

The Cauldron

*“Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.”*

— **William Shakespeare:** *Macbeth*

Chapter 34

Christmas Day, 1942

The first German counterattacks were still defensive in nature, aimed at trying to blunt or simply slow down the Soviet advance on Prokhorovka. Model had shifted 10th Panzergrenadier Division towards Kursk, largely to stave off being surrounded on that flank. The 60th Panzergrenadiers were already fighting there against 1st Shock Army, and now the 13th Panzer Division arrived from the south and went right into action alongside those other two divisions.

The Russian armies that had closed around Model's 2nd Panzerarmee like a vise relented that day, though there was a good deal of hooting and gibing from their lines directed at their enemy. They had taken a pounding all summer, and now they were returning the favor.

In defiance, just before dawn, every German squad that had a weapon with tracer rounds chambered one, and fired it straight up into the sky. To the pilots in German planes who saw it, the sight created a breathtaking outline of the massive pocket that had been formed by the Soviet offensive, stretching from Voronezh west, nearly all the way to Kursk, which was now taken by the Russians. Model's new HQ was at Sary Oskol, in the very center of that pocket, where the rail line came up from Kharkov.

That was Model's lifeline, and it was now being guarded by a very powerful force. It had taken Steiner all of ten days to pull his divisions together near Rostov and find enough rolling stock to get them on the trains. Now, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd SS were finally assembling near Belgorod, and the Wiking Division was already posted further east on the river near Novy Oskol to assist the Reichsführer Brigade opposing the Siberian 5th Shock Army. With Hitler fretting and fuming, Manstein flew to Belgorod to confer with Steiner and plan the defense.

"Do you have enough to stop them?" he asked Steiner.

"I have my full Korps up now, though twenty-five percent of it has already been pulled into the defense against their southern pincer. And remember, I left Grossdeutschland and the Brandenburgers with you, so this

isn't the hammer we used to beat them senseless last summer. That said, with the three divisions I have at Belgorod, I am confident I can save Kharkov."

"Well, I have some good news for you. I'm pulling Grossdeutschland from its reserve position in the south, and the Brandenburgers are coming too."

"Indeed?" Steiner smiled. "That is good news. Then who will take that city for Hitler?"

"It will be up to the infantry divisions. The Brandenburger Division is now mostly that, but it has four brigades—good motorized infantry. We'll mate it with some of the special tank units we've been building and it will remain a formidable force."

"How soon will these additional troops be here?"

"Two or three days. In the meantime, I'd advise staying right where you are. Let them keep pushing, but when you attack, it will likely be towards Kursk. We need to throw Hitler a bone. He's been howling like a mad dog at OKW. But what we need even more is something on the other side to attack in conjunction with your offensive."

"Is there anything available?"

"24th Panzer Division has been rebuilding at Odessa for the last 30 days, and a few of the divisions we sent to the North Front might be combat ready. Getting permission to use them is the key. I may have to fly to OKW and make another personal intervention."

"General, I wish you good luck. Frankly, pulling my Korps out of that hell hole at Volgograd did me and the men a great service. I couldn't see that then, but I know it now."

"Correct. This is the best mobile Korps on the field, and you must always think that way. Blitzkrieg, Steiner, blitzkrieg. Never accept a battle of attrition when you can find a way to maneuver, even if it means you must temporarily yield ground to the enemy. This is something Hitler simply cannot grasp. He is still fighting the last war, where every trench line was fought over day and night. At times, yes, we must be stubborn. Look at Model! That man is a master of defense. He should have pulled out seven days ago, but Hitler would not permit that. Yet he held when he had to, and that has given us the situation we face at this moment. So you will strike towards Kursk, but the good thing here is that we still have a decent road and rail line from Prokhorovka up to Model. He isn't cut off yet, and he can still

fight. You can take that road right towards his headquarters and then swing west towards Kursk, a backhand blow when you do so. Slap that northern pincer right across the face, and see how they like it.”

Saying and planning were one thing, doing those things on the field of battle another. The Russian forces were still in high gear, and Zhukov’s statement to Sergei Kirov concerning the strength of the two pincers he had in motion was no idle boast. Steiner was probably correct in his assessment that he could stop that northern pincer with the three SS divisions he already had preparing to attack. Taking Kursk would be another matter. The great northern bear claw was now composed of no fewer than six tank corps, with a seventh on the line and pushing west instead of south to pose an additional threat.

As for the southern pincer, its main problem now was the lack of bridging equipment. Most of that was still back at the Don, and there were not enough bridging units to come forward with the advance. The Oskol River was now the main obstacle, but 4th Guard Tank Corps used its organic bridging engineers to shore up the ice and get a brigade across. More pontoon regiments were on the way, but the rail lines could not get them close enough to arrive easily. They had to disembark east of the Don, then cross that river and move by truck, and that would take several days.

In spite of all this, the Christmas pause was short lived. The Soviets waited out most of the day, the men eating deliveries of special rations, but the fuel trucks were still working overtime. Then, as midnight approached, Zhukov ordered the attack to resume. Just to irritate his enemy further, he also ordered a small spoiling attack at Moscow, where the Germans had sat on their side of the burned out city all summer, that portion of the front completely static.

The Soviets took Oboyan north of Prokhorovka, though 13th Panzer was still counterattacking in a desperate attempt to hold. West of that town, a hole had developed, and Steiner could not ignore it. He had the Brandenburgers on the trains just west of Belgorod, and the Russians were getting too close. He could not allow them to plow into those trains and interfere with that division’s assembly operation. So, with 1st and 2nd SS divisions formed up and ready, he turned them loose. It was not the backhand blow that Manstein had suggested, not the sly uppercut aimed at Kursk from within the neck that fed Model’s pocket. Instead he was going to punch the Russians right on the

nose of that northern pincer, and bring it to a complete halt.

He could do that, but this bear had two massive clawed paws, and the situation on the Oskol River, which had been stable for the last five days, suddenly exploded. It had taken Rokossovsky all that time to sort out the massive mess of his crossing sites on the Don south of Voronezh, and get bridging equipment up. Now his troops surged over The Oskol River, swarming around the one rock in their path, the Nordland Regiment of the Wiking Division. Some units then moved due west towards Prokhorovka, others northwest towards Kursk.

If Steiner had deployed as Manstein wanted, they would have run right into three SS Panzer Divisions, but that had not happened. The massive buildup of troops from the southern pincer now began flowing over the Oskol River like water over a dam, from Valuyki in the south, as far north as Stary Oskol, where the Soviet 234th Rifle Division had already cut the rail line behind Model's headquarters. The Wiking Division, with the Reichsführer Brigade had been relying on that river obstacle, and they could in no way hold such an extended front. The Nordland Regiment was cut off from the rest of the division, and began falling back, but to the northwest. Even Gille's HQ was under attack, and had to retreat south away from Novy Oskol.

Behind the scenes, Manstein had been busy arranging trainloads of fuel, ammunition, food, spare parts and other supplies. There wasn't a great deal to be had, but perhaps enough for ten days offensive, a nice spoiling attack. The problem now would be extricating Steiner's Korps from that steamrolling Soviet advance. The Russians had already kicked in the back door behind Model, and they were in the house. It was clear to Manstein that 2nd Panzerarmee should be immediately withdrawn, and become an attacking force as it moved towards the neck the Germans were holding open to Stary Oskol. He had to convince Hitler to allow this.

When he arrived at OKW, the mood there was somber. Halder gave him a look that spoke volumes. "Here you come again," he said in a low voice. "But not this time, Manstein. Not this time. The Führer is in no mood to hear the word withdrawal. He ranted over what Kesselring did in Algeria for a week. Now you propose we abandon Voronezh?"

"We will lose it, one way or another. I am simply proposing we do not lose Model's 2nd Panzerarmee along with it."

Hitler heard that, turning to see the general, but with a sour expression

this time. "Come to find more reinforcements?" he said darkly. "Well do not ask. The divisions we have moved to the north front will remain where they are."

"Why?" said Manstein. "Are we planning to go to Leningrad tomorrow?"

"Why? Ask Halder why! I am told all the trains are in the south. I am told you have pulled the Brandenburg Division out of Volgograd. Who gave permission for that?"

"Being the theater commander appointed to Armeegruppe South," said Manstein, "I need no permission. The division was needed elsewhere. Volgograd can wait. This was a wise redeployment."

"Yes, Volgograd can wait. It should have been taken months ago! In fact, I recall that both you and Steiner promised it to me for Christmas. Well, Herr General, there was nothing under my tree this year. In fact, Sergei Kirov and his Generals have taken Tula. They have taken Orel, and now they have taken Kursk for good measure. They are also attacking at Moscow, though thank god the troops there know how to obey orders. They have held the city as I demanded, and I know exactly what you will say next. You want Model to give up Voronezh."

"That would be wise at this juncture," said Manstein. "Three days from now, it may not matter. The Russians will have closed the neck of that pocket, and Model will be completely cut off."

"You have moved Steiner's entire Korps there! What are they doing?" Hitler was now just a few degrees below the boiling point.

"He is already counterattacking, but against the northern pincer."

"Then what is the problem?"

"There are *two* pincers involved, and they are very near meeting one another. Model should withdraw immediately."

"Withdraw! Withdraw! That is all my Generals tell me whenever it snows. I will have the head of the next man who speaks that word to me!"

Now Manstein narrowed his eyes. "My Führer," he said, stepping closer. "You may have my head any time you like, but while it remains on my shoulders, kindly allow me to use it!"

He put just a touch of anger there himself. They were words Manstein had spoken to Hitler in Fedorov's history, during the great crisis and tragedy that had been Stalingrad. Now he spoke them here, instinctively knowing that the loss of Model's troops would be a devastating blow to the army, and one that

it would have great difficulty recovering from. Now he questioned the wisdom of even coming here to seek Hitler's permission at all, thinking it might have been better to simply confront him with a fait accompli, ordering Model out himself. But that Army was under Rundstedt's Armeegruppe Center, and he had no real authority there. All he could do now was make the best argument possible.

"Model is reporting the enemy has crossed the upper Oskol in force," he said, mastering his temper. "They have cut the rail line to Prokhorovka and Kharkov. If we want to save that army, we must do so immediately. So yes, I advise he give up that useless position at Voronezh, and form a shock group here, right at Sary Oskol. He still has fuel and supplies to push southwest, and Steiner can attack up that same corridor. The two forces can link up in a few days. That army can still be saved, which would then put it in a perfect position to block the enemy advance on Kharkov, which is, after all, the final objective of their offensive."

"And what about all these enemy divisions?" Hitler waved at the red lines drawn around Model's Army. "They will all be free to operate against us."

"They are mostly slow moving infantry divisions—too slow to pose a threat for weeks. All of their fast mobile divisions are already well to the southwest of the pocket, striving mightily to meet one another and finish that phase of their operations. Then they will lock arms, and go for Kharkov, shoulder to shoulder—unless we interpose Model's Army between them, and do that now."

"No!" Hitler flared again. "There will be no withdrawal from Voronezh! I forbid that! Look around you. Do you see von Rundstedt here? No, because he is at his position on the front obeying my orders. That is where you should be, not here, trying to stir more honey into my tea as before. Go! Leave at once. I order Steiner to counterattack, but Model stays right where he is."

Hitler turned his back on Manstein now, hunched over the map table, his eyes narrowed with a mix of anger and pain. His miracle worker had come with the same proposal that Keitel and Jodl had pedaled. More withdrawals. They wanted to simply hand the enemy back everything that was won in those long hard months of the summer offensive. He would not allow it, and seeing that Hitler was adamant, Manstein pursed his lips, then saluted and turned to leave.

Halder watched him go, knowing that the war had, in that moment,

crossed some unseen line. It was not something that could be seen on the map like the penciled in lines of the various fronts. It was something darker, more shadowed, more ominous; a turning point where he could feel that his long managed control of these events was now slipping from his grasp, and that of all the other Generals at OKW. Manstein had always been able to influence Hitler to see reason. Now even he seemed powerless to intervene.

As he watched Manstein stride off, without so much as another word, a thought came to him like the cold December wind, and he felt it for the first time, in spite of the warm fire on the hearth across the room. *We could lose this war.* We could lose it all. Hitler will make an end of all our best efforts, and hand us one impossible situation after another. At least Manstein has Steiner, a strong hand at the point of greatest crisis. Let us hope that is enough, because if we do lose Model's Army....

He did not want to think about that. The cold in that line of thinking was enough to freeze the blood in his veins, as it would be now for all those troops if Manstein's prediction were to materialize.

If Fedorov had been there, he might have seen how the lines of fate were now twisting around those of Model's front. Manstein had avoided the debacle at Volgograd. He had correctly and wisely extricated Steiner's Korps from the cauldron in which he sat himself down. Neither Steiner, nor Paulus, were now fighting anywhere near Volgograd. But the shape of that pocket where Model's 2nd Panzerarmee now sat looked strangely like the one that had formed around Paulus between the Volga and the Don. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Chapter 35

Hitler's understanding of how war was fought was in no way like that of Manstein. The Führer wanted any hard won ground held tenaciously. He clung to major cities on a point of honor, endowing them with a significance they might not truly hold in a military sense. That was certainly the case for Volgograd at that moment, and also Voronezh. Hitler Believed it was his stand fast order the previous winter that had saved the day, and kept the burned out warrens of Moscow under his control. Now he would apply the same stubborn method to this crisis.

For Manstein, the vast space of Russia was the perfect proving ground for his concept of the mobile war. That space was to be yielded whenever it might be necessary to permit his forces to move and concentrate where they were most needed. He would even invite the enemy to advance, knowing that every mile they went took them farther from their own source of supplies, created flanks that they would have to man and guard, and presented him with numerous opportunities for a counter thrust. To master the situation, he now wanted to see Model's army used in a mobile role, not to simply sit there like a dull iron anvil and be hammered upon by the Russians. He knew that even the hardest metal could be broken in such a situation. That was what anvils were made for, to burn, break, bend, or shape metal, or in this case to destroy it.

Model's ability to hold as he had thus far was entirely dependent on that slender corridor for supplies, and now the Soviets were doing everything possible to choke it closed. It was as if the red army had both hands on their enemy's neck, trying to choke the life out of him, while Steiner desperately tried to break that grip. Yet as he tried to attack up that corridor, he was met with heavy pressure on both the left and right. Two of his divisions were trying to hold back the southern pincer on the line of the Oskol River, leaving him Leibstandarte and Das Reich, along with the rebuilt 24th panzer Division from Odessa that Manstein had quietly ordered forward seven days ago, again without permission.

The arrival of both Grossdeutschland Division and the Brandenburgers created a noticeable shift in the balance of that struggle. These elite

formations were fiercely competent in the attack, implacable on defense, and they had unshakable morale. Looking around the front for anything else he could find, Manstein saw that he had but one card left to play—Hermann Balck.

11th Panzer Division had been in reserve on the Chir front where it had been so instrumental in the defense there. Now he would commit this last mobile reserve, its place taken by two light armored units provided by Volkov. On the 29th of December, the last train from the south came whistling into the station at Prokhorovka, and the troops, tanks and vehicles of Balck's divisions began to disembark and assemble.

General Balck raised the collar on his trench coat against the wind, tightening the fit of his gloves. Winter again, he thought. Another enemy offensive, and another crisis. We rule the summer, but when General Winter arrives, he is a most formidable foe. Well, my division is rested, lean and trim; ready for another fight. But this does not look like the dance I was hoping to attend. Steiner has thrown the SS right into the teeth of this enemy advance, and right between the two arms of the bear. We should have folded the line back south of Belgorod and the upper Donets, massing Steiner at Kharkov. Then they would have to come over another 100 kilometers, and supply themselves the whole way. That's when we hit them.

Yes, it would mean leaving Model well behind enemy lines, for a time, but he had a stout heart, and can hold ground like no one else in the army. But Manstein doesn't want to lose that army. Being so close at hand, I can see why he turned Steiner loose. Now we see what those troops are really made of. Yet things are quite different this time, are they not? We chased them half way to perdition in the summer, and now I have been racing from one crisis point to another since mid-October.

That same day a new Soviet Army was identified on the front, the 3rd Guards. It had been building up at Tambov for the last six months, built from the burned out remnants of divisions that had fought and died in the struggle against Operation Barbarossa. The men that remained were veterans three times over, and formed the hard kernel of each new division. It followed the line of attack of the northern pincer, but reaching Kursk, it suddenly turned east towards Stary Oskol. The Bear had a fish by the tail, and it wanted to take another good bite. Unfortunately, Model's 2nd Panzerarmee was that fish. That army, with five or six fresh rifle divisions, was enough to punch

through. Model was now completely cut off, and those crucial three days that might have saved his army had slipped away.

The Grossdeutschland Division was attacking to the left of the rail line in the corridor, and the Brandenburgers were to the right. Like a pair of heavy linesmen, they were grinding their way forward, and slowly pushing the enemy back. What they needed now was a good halfback to break through and race on up that line to Stary Oskol. There, Model, being no fool, had massed all his mobile divisions in an effort to break out.

That halfback was Hermann Balck.

New Year's Eve, 1942

It was not the sort of attack he preferred to make, a desperate fourth down and two. He would much rather have his division on open ground, for broken field running was his specialty. That said, he had two strong divisions on his flanks, and so Balck formed up his shock groups, leading with Hauser's Recon Battalion backed by the 15th Panzer Regiment, and then following up with his Panzergrenadiers. They would smash right into the 55th Guard Rifle Division, with the 17th Guard Tank Brigade on its left.

On the other side of the attack, Model had not sat idle. He had six infantry divisions east of the Don, but three were south of Voronezh, holding useless ground. His orders were to hold the city, and that he did, with three divisions, but those other three crossed the Don and moved west on the night of 29 December, and took up better defensive positions on the southern belly of the fish shaped pocket in which he found himself. This freed up his 24th Panzer Korps and allowed him to move 17th and 18th Panzer Divisions to join the units he already had fighting at Stary Oskol.

The relief attack was coming right up the road and rail line towards that town, and he massed whatever he could to make a breakout attempt as the sound of their guns drew ever nearer. In a strange way, the entire action resembled the relief attempt that had actually been mounted by Hoth to try and save Paulus, the original Operation Winter Storm. That had been eventually halted on the Myskova river by the arrival of Malinovski's powerful 2nd Guards Army. Here, it was the 3rd Guards Army under General Dmitri Lelyushenko trying to bar the way.

Just before midnight, when all those troops would have much rather been

pleasantly drunk in the arms of a woman, Balck's intrepid division punched through and opened a hole. Behind him came the Fusilier Regiment of the Grossdeutschland Division, surging into the gap. And on the other side, they met a kampfguppe of troops from Model's army, jubilantly joining hands as the clock tolled out the coming of the new year. Whether they could hold that thin corridor remained undecided at that point, but they at least got through.

Manstein got the news right at midnight, pleased and proud that his troops had pushed through, but realizing the herculean task that now lay ahead. To secure that corridor, he now had to push back both those great arms of the bear trying to strangle it with the claws of their armored formations. 1st and 2nd SS were still pushing, on the left, and 3rd and 5th SS were pushing on the right, along the line of the Oskol River. Both enemy pincers had been stopped, and even pushed back in places, but for how long?

Even if they succeeded, he still had no permission to withdraw Model's troops, there they would sit, with the the neck of that supply corridor the subject of constant enemy counterattacks. All they had accomplished, and with the best divisions in the German army, was to get back again the same dilemma Manstein had gone to OKW to try and solve. He was still enraged at Hitler's stupidity and obstinate mindset. Steiner's superb SS Korps would now be tied down here indefinitely. It was madness. What was he to tell Model now—sit there, like the nine panzer divisions were now sitting on the Northern Front?

Madness. There were now 15 infantry divisions, including two Luftwaffe field divisions, 3rd, 4th, 17th, and 18th Panzers, and the 10th and 29th Motorized Divisions in that pocket. That was a force on the same scale as the losses sustained at Stalingrad in Fedorov's history.

He had to take some decisive action, and now again considered the desperate option of conspiring with Rundstedt and Model to simply do what was necessary, orders or no orders. They would certainly all lose their jobs, if not their heads, but he also had one more option—resignation. Yet if not even that could move Hitler, Manstein would then forfeit any further control or influence over the battles that surely lay ahead. His duty to the army itself weighed heavily in that decision. After having drafted his threat, he summarily tore it to pieces, shaking his head.

That night, as a column of vital supplies was pushed through the embattled corridor for Model, Steiner reported that he had stopped the

northern pincer and stabilized that sector of the front. The line of the Oskol was also solid. The sour grapes that Manstein could pick would now rest in that report to OKW.

‘Front stabilized,’ he cabled. ‘Supply corridor reestablished to Model necessitates continued deployment of the Army’s best mobile divisions to hold it open, unless a force of at least 6 to eight infantry divisions is sent to relieve those troops. The threat to Kharkov has been put off for the moment, though a further push for Kursk against strong enemy reserves in that sector seems impractical. Redeployment of 2nd Panzerarmee through the corridor to bring it safely within the German front near Prokhorovka would also allow Steiner to redeploy and reorganize for a new counterattack aimed at recovering lost ground. Should Model be forced to remain in place, Steiner must as well, and no further offensive action can be contemplated until the matter is resolved, nor will Steiner’s SS be able to refit in time to participate in Operation *Untergang*. Model’s present position remains precarious, unless a strong force could be mustered east of Bryansk and Kirov to again drive on Voronezh and threaten to encircle the enemy forces in the Kursk sector. Otherwise, 2nd Panzerarmee will remain a useless liability that will continue to require a heavy commitment by both the army and Luftwaffe to keep it in supply.’

It was a blunt and grimly realistic appraisal, but also hinted that the Army had the means to resolve this crisis if it could get permission to use it. Manstein knew exactly where he could find that strong force, in the nine panzer Divisions presently refitting in three separate Korps along the Northern Front. He knew that asking for those troops directly would get him nowhere, but he would have been remiss if he did not suggest this option for OKW’s consideration. Keitel and Jodl would certainly support it, but Hitler was again the great obstacle.

And so, 1942 would close with Armeegruppe South having cleared the Donets Basin, taking Rostov, establishing a strong foothold in the north Kuban region, and driving all the way to the Volga to make the linkup with Volkov’s troops. Armeegruppe Center still had both Moscow and Voronezh, pyrrhic victories owed only to the stubborn implacable will of Adolf Hitler. It would be some time before the Führer would answer that cable, and by then it would be 1943.

* * *

For Zhukov, supply was now becoming a critical factor for his forward units. Kursk was the new logistical center for the northern Group, but all the rail lines leading into that city had been badly torn up by the fighting, and would take weeks to repair, possibly months. With no direct rail connection, and few good roads, that arm of the Bear had been stopped by Hitler's damnable SS divisions. They had also thrown up a steel wall all along the line of the Oskol River, their defense so determined that he could find no way to try and move more divisions across the river. He still had three tank corps in reserve, and reluctantly ordered them back to the railheads east of the Don for deployment elsewhere.

The enemy had reestablished contact with the Voronezh pocket, though he was surprised that no effort was now being made to extract those troops from the dangerous position he had forced upon them. It was now clear to him that Kharkov was not an attainable objective, and he reported as much to Sergei Kirov.

"We have more than adequate force at hand, but keeping them moving and fighting is an equally big problem. Supply deliveries to the front are now down to 50% of normal, and in the Kuban no more than 10%. I would therefore suggest that we now redeploy to build up forces along the line of the Oka for a drive west. It may yet be possible to take either Kirov or Bryansk back, and such a drive would also threaten communications to the enemy position at Moscow, and possibly force them to commit troops they are presently rebuilding for any planned offensive against Leningrad."

"And Voronezh?"

"Let them have it if they want it," said Zhukov. "That cauldron we have Model in will be nothing more than a witch's brew of torment for that army. I will keep pressure on it, but make no effort to liquidate it just yet. What was it Napoleon said? Ah, never interfere with your enemy when he is busy making a mistake."

"General Zhukov," said Kirov. "You have already surprised me greatly with this offensive, and it has certainly caused the enemy much grief. I will therefore authorize any transfer of forces you deem necessary, and yes, if you can get back Bryansk or even Kirov, the boost to morale would be invaluable. I commend you on your generalship, and express every confidence in the

planning and execution of these offensives in the time that remains this winter. I will also do everything possible to see to this shortfall of supplies, and will send rail repair crews presently in the Leningrad sector to aid in this.”

That easy cooperation between Kirov and Zhukov would now stand in stark contrast to the adversarial relationship between Hitler and his Generals. Zhukov would take his laurels, but he could not help commenting on that count.

“I thank you, Mister General Secretary, “but I must tell you that the enemy had the means to stop this offensive long ago. They simply refused to use it. Perhaps they saw our attack as intending exactly that, interfering with their plans for the new year spring offensive. That was true in part, but they could have stopped us much sooner, and should have.”

“There is discord at OKW,” said Berzin. “My operatives have even learned that several key officers have considered resigning their positions. Thus far none have had the temerity to directly challenge Hitler, and the Führer has not changed his mind about fighting this winter as he did the last. He has reiterated his stand fast order, and specified that no division, anywhere on the front, should be moved without his permission. It seems more than one German General has been pilfering any available reserves they could find. Hitler, himself, has again assumed overall control of daily battlefield operations, and reduced OKW to the level of mere staff officers.”

“That will be the end of them,” said Kirov, for both he and Berzin knew quite well that this had happened once before. The Material they still had was replete with examples.

“Well then,” said Kirov. “Do as you suggest, General Zhukov, but before you leave, let us drink some good champagne and celebrate this new year. It will be our year, our time to take this war to the enemy in a way he might never expect. We have taught him to beware of General Winter, but this year we must learn how to beat them in the spring and summer as well.”

He raised his glass, watching the bubbles in rising from some unseen point at the bottom and making that jubilant journey to the top. Somehow, this effort had convinced him that the darkest hours of the war might be over, even if they were to lose Volgograd one day soon. They would hold on, and as Fedorov had told him decades ago, they could win.

“Gentlemen,” he said with a smile, “to 1943!”

Chapter 36

A good deal would happen on other fronts in those last months of the year, though we will not have time to visit every chapter of this long war. In the Pacific, October and November saw Yamamoto muster his 1st and 2nd Carrier Divisions at Truk, and proceed to the New Hebrides. He arrived too late to prevent another regiment of US Marines from moving from Samoa to Fiji, and by the time he bulled his way east towards the island, the American carriers had withdrawn.

His thinking continued to be dominated by the need for a decisive engagement with the US Navy but it was not to be in late 1942. With Halsey hospitalized, Nimitz pulled his last two fleet carriers out, waiting for the arrival of the *Essex*. He knew he could not face the *Kido Butai* again with only *Enterprise* and *Wasp*, and would not risk losing those valuable ships. They played cat and mouse, with small raids against Japanese occupied Wake Island, and the Marshalls. They also provided distant cover for convoys bound for Samoa, slipping away before the Japanese could seek to engage them.

It was a case of 'pick on someone your own size,' and the last months of 1942 saw the US intervene in French Polynesia, clearing out the last of the French Navy there, occupying the Society Islands, and taking Tahiti for a distant supply base. It was about 2500 miles from Truk to Fiji, a distance that already strained Japanese fleet units to try and maintain a secure supply line. Tahiti was over 4300 miles from Truk, farther away than Pearl Harbor, and so it was simply too far off to consider bothering, and would become a secure rear area base for the Americans.

With carrier superiority in late 1942, Yamamoto was able to keep his troops on Fiji supplied and reinforced, but the US had enough there to hold their enemy in check. A jungle stalemate resulted, with neither side able to push the other off the island, and Nimitz was soon proposing a different plan altogether to begin taking the war to the enemy. Once he built up carrier strength, he would be ready to fight again, and possibly decide the issue in the South Pacific, but that would happen in 1943.

Essex joined the fleet in late October, but spent the last two months of the war learning how to operate in a fast carrier group. By December, Nimitz would receive a few more Christmas presents. Two more in the class were

rushing towards completion, the *Bon Homme Richard* was renamed *Yorktown II*, and the *Cabot* was renamed *Lexington II*. They would both start sea trials in January, hoping to be ready later in that month. With them would come a family of three children, the first being the escort carrier *Independence*, and then a pair of twins, two more hybrids that had been rushed to completion after the battle in the New Hebrides where *Shiloh* and *Antietam* proved their worth.

There had been seven *New Orleans* Class hulls built out as heavy cruisers, but two more were left in the shipyards as the war broke out. Hull numbers eight and nine, became the *Gettysburg* and *Vicksburg*, a concession to the concept of the hybrid scout carrier that could look for enemy forces and allow the fleet carriers to use all their planes in the strike role. They were also seen as possible commerce raiders, and at 36 knots, were fast enough to evade most ships that might outgun them, and harass, or even sink an enemy cruiser with their planes. So when Yamamoto finally did get another chance at taking on the US fleet, it would be much bigger than he imagined.

By January of 1943, there would be five fleet carriers in the Pacific again, one escort carrier and the four hybrids. Against this, Japan would also have her five remaining fleet carriers, and five light carriers. As Yamamoto had feared, the US was building carriers faster than he could sink them. As the new year dawned, there would soon be a relative parity between the two sides again, and the shadow boxing would end. It was time to fight.

* * *

In the west, the first order of business for the British was to establish a garrison in Spain in the event the Germans ever thought to return. With the Canary Islands now secure, most of what was once 110 Force there was pulled out and moved to Spain, along with reserve troops that had been guarding Madeira. They would join the 29th and 36th Brigade Groups, and the 10th Armored Division there. The 6th Armored, and all of 3rd Infantry Division, would move to North Africa to join the 43rd Wessex Division and form Montgomery's Algerian Corps. It was further augmented with the 33rd and 34th Armored Brigades, one each operating with those two infantry Divisions.

Patton's sullen prediction that Montgomery would take a month to get

ready for operations was overly optimistic. Oran was barely functioning in late October, and Algiers was in even worse shape after it finally fell. So it was not until late November that plans were laid for renewed operations, and another several weeks before all was ready. To be “teed up,” as Monty put things. The rainy season had slowed everything to a crawl.

There was also the matter of Gibraltar to settle with the German garrison there, which had been stolidly holding the place for some months. Yet now that Franco had been removed, Brooke argued that Gibraltar’s importance was now much diminished. “We’ve got the full cooperation of Spain now,” he said. “The Fascists have been rooted out, a new monarchy installed, and now we have access to all those marvelous ports and airfields. Compared to that, the Rock seems like a little mouse hole, and we really don’t need it.”

“Oh but we do,” Churchill wagged a finger at him. “No one picks the Crown’s pocket lightly, or without facing the consequences. The Rock is ours, and we’ll have it back. Allies can be fickle partners. They squabble with you like a wife at times. Yet I suppose that there is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is to fight without them.”

“Yet do you really want to commit troops to what will certainly be a costly attack there?”

“If necessary. If they remain adamant. The better course would be to simply starve them out. We won’t stoop to the level they went when they threatened us with that ghastly business involving gasoline. They’ll get water from the catchments there, but no food. Starve them out, and every week make them the offer of a good banquet in exchange for surrender. You’ll see how soon a man’s resolve withers away when his belly is empty.”

That became the plan, and it was going to work. All of September and October passed, the garrison remaining adamant, in spite of the fact that their food had run out weeks ago. The Germans tried to parachute in supplies, but the RAF shot down the transport planes. They tried to sneak in food on a U-boat, but the Royal Navy sunk it. A few then tried to slip off in a small boat to go fishing, but they were seen and strafed until they fled back to the shore. Every week, Churchill would quietly inquire as to the status of the situation. On November 15th, he ordered the troops investing the place to fire up open air barbecue pits so the smell of roasting beef would waft over the whole place. Three days later, having gone for over five weeks without food, the Garrison accepted terms for an honorable surrender. The British replied that

would be granted only if the tunnels and passages were not subjected to any demolition.

It was just one more thing for Hitler to rage about, but by then he had much more to worry about in Russia. Churchill had the Rock back, quietly informing a certain Elena Fairchild of that when it finally happened. He summoned her and Captain MacRae to a private meeting in the Cabinet War Rooms beneath the Treasury Building near Whitehall.

“Miss Fairchild,” he said, greeting her warmly. “I have heard a good deal about you, and your marvelous ship—our ship, though it is still quite a leap for me to realize it won’t be built for decades.”

“And an equal jump for me to wake up each morning and still find myself here.”

“Captain, that was a fine job you did in the Raid on St. Nazaire, and not a single ship was lost in the convoys escorted by your destroyer. I only wish we had ten more like this *Argos Fire*. Then we could really put the fire to Doenitz and his damnable wolfpacks. Now, I understand that you have made a little delivery to the Isle of Man.”

“Aye sir,” said Gordon. “All safe and sound.”

“That was all that remained of this Brigade that served us so well in the desert?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Elena.

“Well, we can’t risk losing any more of that equipment in combat—not until we’ve had a good long look at it.”

“I wish I could say that would help you,” said MacRae, “but most of what you’ll see there could not be replicated in any way at this time. Those vehicles run with highly specialized computers. The art of miniaturizing components used in their design and construction won’t be available until the 1980s and 90s. You’ll get some good ideas, particularly if you look over the Challengers, but they utilize exotic materials you will not be able to replicate. As to the computers, I strongly suggest you don’t even touch them.”

“Good ideas will have to do for the moment,” said Churchill. “Yet I summoned you here to discuss something else. It seems you had business with one of our battleships?” He gave Elena a knowing glance.

“I did, sir, though it took me a while to realize that. There was an artifact aboard that was of some interest.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the story. The Selene Horse.... To think it had that key

hidden away like that, and nobody knew it. There it was, sitting in the British Museum for decades, before we crated the Elgin Marbles up and moved them to the tube during the Blitz. I'm not quite sure who had the bright idea to ship them off to the Yanks with all that gold, but the outcome of that little venture was most unfortunate. These keys... What might they open?"

"One sent my ship here," said Elena. "We have a second, delivered by the late Admiral Volsky, a gift from his young Captain."

"Ah, yes, that young man Fedorov—a most enterprising soul. He had such a key?"

"Apparently, though we aren't certain how he may have come by it, or when."

"Might it serve like the other—the one that brought your ship here?"

"We aren't certain of that either. But on my ship I have a box that seems designed to hold these keys for safekeeping."

"A box?"

"We found it at Delphi... This is a long story, but you might as well hear it." Elena then related the tale of how the *Argos Fire* had come there, but left off the part about the Watch, Tovey, and a few other details."

"My word," said Churchill. "Someone has a fancy for tucking away little surprises in the remains of ancient Greece monuments."

"And perhaps in other places." Elena threw that out like a bridge player leading into a long suit, and Churchill was quick to answer.

"Other places? Well you may be pleased to learn that the Germans have finally given up Gibraltar. We starved the jackals out! Now then, I understand this key that was oddly packed away on the *Rodney* had something to do with Saint Michael's Cave."

"So we believe, sir. If the place is secure, I think we'd better have a good close look. I have men for the job, very reliable."

"Any idea what you expect to find?"

"A door. That what keys mostly open, when they aren't mated to magic boxes. The one I was given got me through that door beneath Delphi, and we now think there is something in Saint Michael's Cave that needs close inspection."

"Yet you haven't the key to open such a door, assuming one exists. Hasn't it gone down with *Rodney*? Or are these all a kind of Skeleton Key that can open many things at once."

“We don’t know, but we at least have two keys to make a go of it if we do find a door there that needs opening.”

“If neither works? Then what? I can make the services of our artisan engineers available to you. They’ve tunneled out miles of passageways in the rock. This would just be one more.”

“I don’t think I would advise that, sir,” said Elena. “First off, these doors, at least the one I’ve seen, are rather sturdy, made from highly refined metal alloys that were obviously built to keep uninvited people out. No. I think it needs the key. Even demolition charges might not work on such a door.”

“Then we could simply go through the stone to either side,” Churchill suggested.

“Sir,” said Elena. “If your dentist told you it might be a bit of a task to get at the ache that’s been bothering you, would you advise him to drill out the teeth to either side? What I am suggesting is that whatever might be behind such a door should be... well preserved, and safeguarded. I’m afraid demolitions and willy-nilly drilling might be out of the question.”

“I don’t understand. It isn’t likely that we will ever fetch the key that went down with *Rodney*. It’s full fathom five, or worse by now, with bones of coral made.”

“Sir... and this may be difficult to explain. I was told by a certain gentleman, who might best remain undisclosed now, that there may be a means of locating that key.”

“Beneath the Atlantic Ocean?”

“Not quite. It may be there now, and unreachable, but that was not always the case. As our presence here testifies, movement in time is now an impossible possibility. A moment ago you stated the key was just sitting in the British Museum for decades. And it was somewhere else before that.”

“You’re suggesting that we might move in time to fetch the thing? My friend Mister H.G. Wells would love that. Have you read his tale?”

“I have sir. It’s a bit of a classic.”

“Yet we don’t seem to have a time machine handy. Otherwise your suggestion would be a splendid idea.”

“Well sir, we might have a time machine handy after all. My ship moved in time, that much is clear. The Russian ship moved in the same way, though that mystery is a horse of a different color. All that aside, something along those lines might be done, though I can’t confirm anything at this moment.

Yet I think we had better have a look at Saint Michael's Cave just the same. Might I have your permission to proceed there?"

"Of course. I'll see that the navy knows you'll be coming. But Miss Fairchild... What do you think you will find there? If there is a door of some kind, what might it lead to, another box like the one on your ship?"

Elena hesitated a moment. She had her suspicions, but no real certain knowledge. "All we know is that we have these keys, and with minutely engraved numerals that correspond to geographic coordinates. Those on the key within *Rodney* point directly to Saint Michael's Cave."

At that Churchill raised an eyebrow, slowly lighting a cigar.

"You have seen this first hand? How would that be possible?"

"No, I haven't see it myself, but this was confided to me by a reliable source."

"Yet one you prefer not to disclose."

Elena relented. "Mister Prime Minister, this information does not come from this era, but from a future time."

"Ah... Then your source is a gentleman, or lady, from the future?"

"Precisely. It would make sense, actually, for more would be known about this the in future years."

"Then the key itself was obtained at some future time. That at least is hopeful. That being the case, Miss Fairchild, doesn't it speak to the futility of looking into this further? You have just established that it will not happen until some future moment."

Elena inclined her head. "My dear sir, I have history books on my ship that related the events of this war in great detail. In them, the German army never attacked Gibraltar, nor did they ever occupy the Rock. They never reached Moscow either, and I could go on to relate any number of events that have clearly happened here, but never happened in the history I know. The point I am making is this—things change, the history is not chiseled in stone, and interventions in the course of these events from travelers originating in the future are likely the cause of these changes."

Churchill nodded, taking a thoughtful drag on his cigar. "In that light, I can see how keen your interest is to visit Saint Michael's Cave. Please do so at your earliest convenience, and do let this old man know what you find there, if anything. And speaking of your history, it might also be interesting to take a little peek at one of those books of yours, and see what I might have

to deal with in 1943.”

“Of course, sir, we’ll do anything we can for you.”

Churchill thought about that, recalling what the young Russian Captain had said to him about the danger of knowing too much, and how it might influence him to reach decisions he might not have otherwise taken, changing the history he sought to grasp in the first place.

“On second thought,” he said, watching the smoke slowly rise from his cigar. “I think I’d better confine myself to reading reports written in the here and now. We’ve a new year on our doorstep, and trying to walk in my own shadow simply won’t do. I think I’d prefer to face it head on, and not know what that other self of mine once did, or failed to do. Beyond that, you might consider that this is the true course of history now, not that written in your books. These events may never reach an accord with your library, and we must live them through.”

“Aye sir,” said MacRae, and Elena nodded.

“Let’s drink on it then. I always like to follow a good cigar with brandy. To 1943 then!”

* * *

He never could sleep on a submarine. The dreams always bothered him, but nothing like this. He awoke with a start, sitting up with a gasp, as if he had stopped breathing in his sleep, and nearly hitting his head on the bunk above. A bright light glared at him, and he blinked, holding up his hand to ward it off.

“Sorry to disturb you sir,” came a voice... He knew that voice, the quiet, steady tones, the sureness when it spoke. Then his eyes adjusted to the light, and he could see the other man’s face, framed in the open hatch to his room. It was Captain Gromyko.

“The officers were going to have a little New Year’s celebration in the wardroom, and we thought you might want to join us. If you’d rather sleep sir, that’s fine. Sorry to disturb you.”

Gromyko looked at him now, his face suddenly registering concern. “Are you alright sir?”

Was he alright?

His mind was spinning with sudden recollection. Gromyko... the

submarine... *Kazan*.... The mission.... It was all coming back, a flood of images that washed over him like a tidal wave, saturating his mind in a confusing and disorienting rush. Yet the mission was over, was it not? They had found Karpov in the Sea of Japan, or at least they found the ship. They had slipped beneath it like an unseen demon, and the workings of that arcane magic in the reactor room had saved the day... yes.... Rod-25. How could he be here now, back on the submarine; back on *Kazan*?

“Sir?” said Gromyko. “Shall I call the ship’s physician?”

He held up a hand, reassuring the Captain that he was alright. “All is well, Captain,” he said still struggling to place himself here in the mad rush of recollection. Other memories were there, beneath the torrent that now cascaded into his mind. “Yes, I will join you,” he said, still seeming groggy with sleep. “I think I need some air.”

The man shifted out of the bunk, feet heavily on the deck, and stood up on unsteady legs. “My sea legs aren’t what they used to be,” he said, gripping the side of the bed rail hard. Gromyko stepped forward to render assistance, still worried. He knew the other man was an old surface warrior, and they had been down under the ice a good long while. Some men never really could find their sea legs on a submarine, and it seemed that Admiral Volsky was one of them.

“Here sir,” said Gromyko. “Let me give you a hand. Then we’ll both raise a toast to the new year—unless you don’t feel up to it.”

“What?” said Volsky. “Captain, I was just dreaming, but I can still drink most any man I have ever met under the table. What year have we gotten ourselves into this time?”

“Why, 1943, sir. 1943.”

The Saga Continues...

Book 27 in the Kirov Saga

1943

The presence of an old Sea Dog aboard *Kazan* introduces an unexpected twist as the new year begins, and the fate of the original *Kirov* now becomes clearer. Who is this Admiral, and how much does he know of all that came before?

The Pacific War heats up again with the return of Admiral Halsey. And with him comes a rejuvenated fast carrier force. Ready for battle at last, Nimitz and Halsey plan a daring new direction for the war. Recalled from the Indian Ocean, Captain Harada and crew join Yamamoto and the *Kido Butai* to seek the decisive battle that could decide the balance of power in the Pacific for 1943. Meanwhile, their alliance renewed, Karpov and Fedorov take the battlecruiser *Kirov* out of the frigid north to seek battle in the warmer waters of the South Pacific. With both men now determined to fight and win this war, Vladimir Karpov takes off the gloves and gets serious.

Meanwhile in North Africa, the Allies launch a bold new offensive aimed at breaking Kesselring's line of defense in Algeria. Involving amphibious landings to the rear of the enemy position, the Royal Navy is called to action to cover these operations. Now Admiral Raeder must decide the fate of his Mediterranean Squadron, as *Bismarck* rejoins the fleet to lead the Kriegsmarine to battle.

In the east, General Zhukov plays out his last cards in the Soviet Winter Offensive, and plans for the new year centered on two key cities. First, the showdown at Kursk to resolve the fate of Model's 2nd Panzerarmee, and then the buildup for Operation *Untergang*, the drive on Leningrad that the Germans hope will bring the downfall of Soviet Russia

1943 begins with action on three fronts, on land and at sea!

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 Rosselsprung, 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 Hammer*. As the new year of 1943 dawn, the Allies now begin their war in earnest, and the outcome of the battles looming ahead will decide the course of the war.

You can enter the series at any season by reading the novel that immediately precedes your desired entry point, as it also acts as a prelude to events beginning that season. Information on the battles covered in each book 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

With books 28-32 to be announced

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