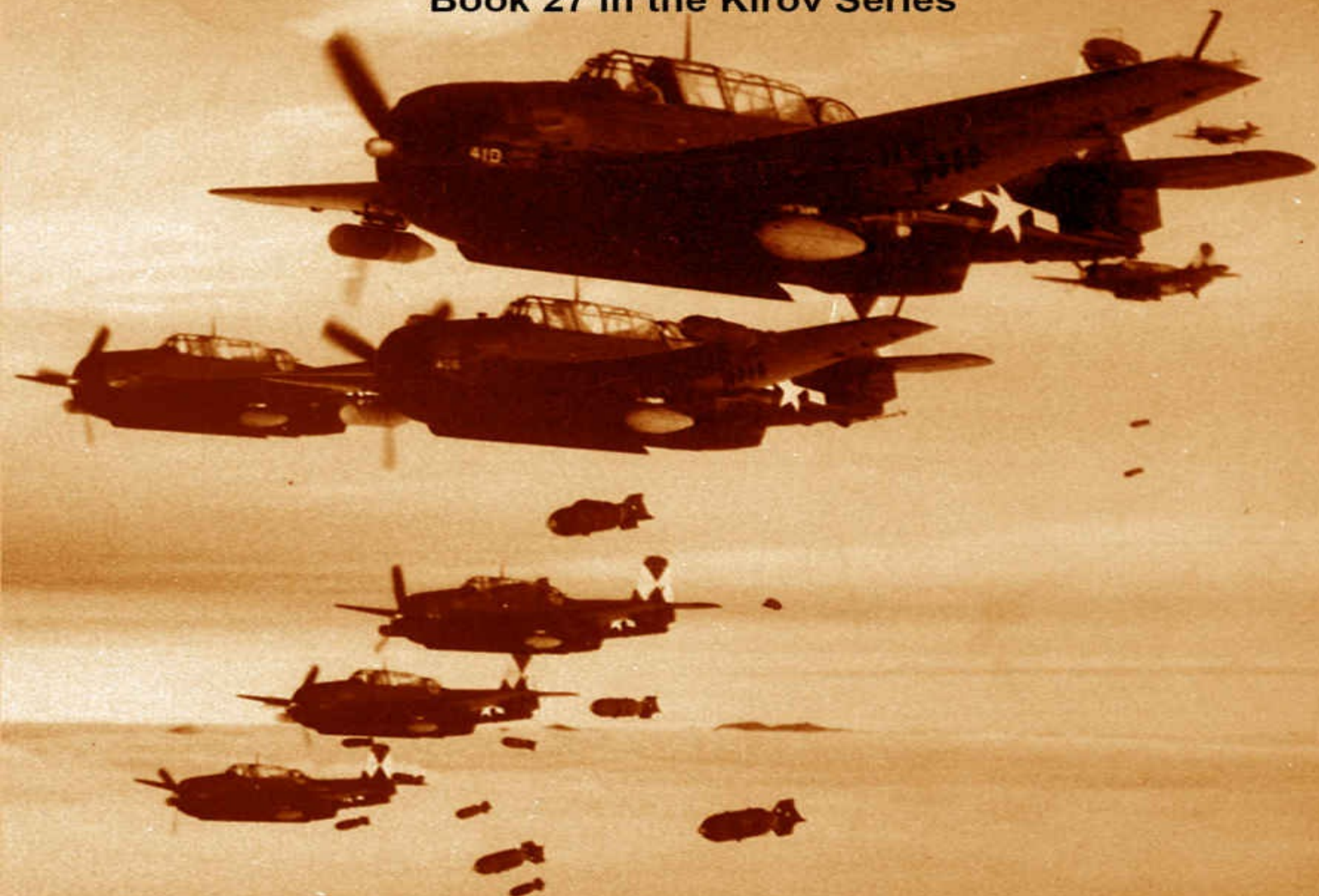


Kirov Saga



Book 27 in the Kirov Series



1943

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler

Kirov Saga:

1943

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

Here we go into 1943, and with a book that will be exclusively devoted to action on the Pacific Front. If any of you happened to pick up the *Roll of Thunder/Sea of Fire* battle book duo, then with this book you will have the entire Pacific theater subplot in hand from Pearl Harbor to this action in January 1943.

We'll begin here with the strategy the US devises to begin offensive operations, as they have been pushed as far as they can afford to go, and can yield no further territory to Japan. Now it is time to fight back, and so in this volume we will be returning to the major ground battles fought on Viti Levu in the Fiji Group, and the subsequent naval engagements fought to support that battle.

But the Americans have built up a great deal of strength through 1942, both with land forces and in the Navy. In this altered meridian, the arrival of each *Essex* Class carrier is accelerated by about 3 months, but as you will see, the Japanese also have a few tricks up their sleeve. I'll also lay the groundwork here for a lot of new planes on both sides that will soon be entering the war.

The year ahead is going to be very busy, as we now have both Patton and Monty gearing up for a big push on Tunisia. That will be next, and then it will be followed by the Spring thaw in Russia, and the Germans once again transitioning to offensive operations on the East Front. While the Soviets staved off defeat with Zhukov's stunning winter offensive of 1942-1943, the battles to be fought in 1943 will decide the fate of Sergei Kirov's Soviet Union, and by extension, they could very well decide the outcome of the entire war.

I'm looking forward to writing it all for you, and as always, the major characters you have all come to know and love will play prominent roles in all this action. One last note... Somebody finally got the *Kirov* series in to Wikipedia! Halleluiah! You can check out the link here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirov_\(novel_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirov_(novel_series)) , and I am very grateful to

whoever it was out there who took the time to do this. Thank you! - *John Schettler*

Part I

The Admiral's War

*“I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast,
for I intend to go in harm's way.”*

—John Paul Jones: 16 NOV 1778

Chapter 1

The plan that had brought the Admirals together had been a long time coming, first hammered out in the shipyards as the workers hastened to get new carriers to sea; then hammered out between the senior officers on every side, eventually refereed by Roosevelt himself.

It was a plan as much born of necessity as it was from any sense of strategy. The enemy had pushed as far as the Allies could permit, and there was no more ground they could afford to give. That was as true now in the Pacific as it had been for the Russians that winter. It was time to dig in, to hold on, and then to start pushing back.

At the Washington conference in early December of 1942, the Allies had met to discuss strategy in the Pacific, and assign responsibilities for the defense of that area. At that time, the 180th meridian, which was the dividing line between the east and west hemisphere, was selected as the demarcation point. The US would defend everything to the east of that line, and the Commonwealth everything to the west. That soon became impractical, when it was seen that the real thrust of the Japanese offensive fell to the west of that line, and that the Commonwealth was wholly incapable of stopping it. Now Admirals King and Nimitz had to decide how to intervene, and more, how to prosecute this war against Japan.

It was Napoleon who once remarked that: “The passage from the defensive to the offensive is one of the most delicate operations of war.” Now King and Nimitz had to undertake that operation. They had done everything possible to defend the few islands that still remained, and with the overall goal of keeping the vital lines of communications open to Australia. There sat MacArthur, simmering and steaming, writing off directives and demands for the eyes of Roosevelt himself. To take that passage from defense to offense, there were two clear routes open that became the subject of heated discussion.

MacArthur wanted to use Australia as his springboard to attack Papua New Guinea, then seize the Bismarcks, advance up the eastern coast of New Guinea to then attack the Philippines, followed by Formosa. This would not only eliminate the strong Japanese presence in these areas, but also cut off all

the Japanese possessions in the Dutch East Indies, and establish a link to China, where it was thought that the US could then assist the Chinese War effort against the bulk of the Japanese Army on the ground. Yet to Nimitz and King, that road looked like a long and difficult slog against the bulk of the Japanese forces committed to the South Pacific.

“Halsey had just enough force in hand to stop the Japanese,” said Nimitz, “but it cost us *Lexington*, *Yorktown*, *Saratoga*, and *Wasp*. Thankfully, we hurt the enemy too, and they lost four of their big carriers as well. So you might call it a draw, but it was a near run thing. We were barely able to get enough forces to Fiji in time to stop them from taking Suva. Now, however, the buildup there has led to parity, and with the arrival of 2nd Marine Division in theater, we’ll have an edge for the first time on the ground.”

To get that edge, the Army had contributed the 23rd “Pacifica” Division, which had once been called the “Americal” Division in the old History. It was holding the south coast of the island, along the important Queen’s Road that connected Suva to the west coast ports of Nandi and Lautouka. The Army 37th Division, the first to arrive in early 1942, was now holding the large secondary island of Vanua Levu, where the US was actively building numerous airfields to insure air superiority over the islands, even if no US carriers could be on hand. That was an expedient forced upon them by the fact that the carriers lost in the early actions had so diminished US naval power, that the fleet had to be withdrawn to Pago Pago in the Samoa group, and Tahiti.

“Now we have three divisions tied down in the Fiji Group,” said King. “They put in two on the main island, the 38th and 48th, all troops they used to take the Philippines. After what they did to MacArthur in the Philippines, I’ll be honest and say I had my doubts we could hold Fiji at all.”

“Our Marines are tough hombres,” said Nimitz. “That was what made the difference. And this time we have enough fighters at Suva to contest and hold the airspace over that island, but that may not last forever.”

“Alright,” said King, “So we laid on the ropes for the last half of 42. Now it’s time to start punching again. But we may have to land one on MacArthur’s chin before we get things moving. First off, he wants command over the whole shebang, including our two Marine divisions. Well, to hell with that. I’ve insisted that you be named overall commander of all naval forces, and that includes the Marines. The Army can follow up and occupy

positions we take, and MacArthur can run that operation.”

“MacArthur won’t like that one bit,” said Nimitz. “He’ll say we’re trying to steal the whole show out here and relegate the Army, and his own illustrious self, to a secondary role.” He’s been insisting on his drive to Rabaul, which is complete lunacy at this stage. We can’t contemplate such moves until we have Fiji and Noumea. Can you imagine trying to lift three divisions out of Australia through the Coral Sea with Japanese air power right there in New Caledonia? It’s madness.”

“MacArthur was quick to clarify his position last week,” said King. “He says he never had any intention of striking at Rabaul before we had obtained favorable positions in the Solomons and on the east coast of Papua New Guinea, but that isn’t going to happen any time soon.”

“Agreed,” said Nimitz. “Frankly, all this talk of an offensive now is premature in my view. We still haven’t licked the Japanese Navy, and until we do that, our own carriers won’t be able to go after places like Noumea and beat them down. So it’s going to come down to another big rodeo with the *Kido Butai*, and this time we’ve got to come out on top.”

“Right,” said King. “With the addition of the three new *Essex* Class carriers, we’ve reached parity again. We can out build them, which argues we might continue to wait for more carriers to gain an advantage, but we’ve been dragging our feet long enough. I’ve obtained permission from the President and Joint Chiefs to commit the Navy to offensive operations. The only question now is where?”

“Let’s look at this from the other side,” said Nimitz. “What will Yamamoto do? He’s taken Ceylon, and that really has the British up in arms, and he’s reinforced his troops on Fiji. It’s clear that they mean to consolidate and hold everything they’ve taken. Noumea is getting more supplies to sustain that operation, and they’ve started moving fighters from the New Hebrides to Nandi and Tavua on Fiji. At the same time, they’re starting to build up forces at Tulagi in the Solomons.”

“So we have to hit these operations, and strike at his line of communications to Fiji,” said King. “That’s where he’s placed most of his chips. The Japanese have more ground troops there than they have in all the rest of the south. I say we try and saw off that tree limb, and cut the supply lines to Fiji.”

“Their base at Noumea is a good location for logistical support. They run

supplies down from Rabaul through the Coral Sea, and then from Noumea to Fiji. They moved bombers there, but it's still too far for them to really bother us in the Fiji group. For that, they'll need to build up in the New Hebrides, and so I think we ought to hurt them right there, at Efate and Luganville. Tulagi is secondary, but we ought to hit it too."

"So what do you propose?"

"I'll want the new *Essex* Carrier Group under Halsey, and have him move down to Baker Island. Spruance has the *Enterprise* and *Hornet* there, and that will give us all five fleet carriers. As for the escort carriers, I'll send them in as advanced scout groups to try and locate the enemy carriers before they find us first. I'll form up the fleet carriers here, northwest of the New Hebrides. That will put them outside of the range of Jap air power in the Fijis and Noumea. We pound Efate and Luganville, and put a stop to their development of those bases. That will get their attention, and they'll likely come at us from the west of those islands. Remember that little affair the first week of the war with the Pensacola Convoy? That just might be a template for how this thing could shape up—the Second Battle of the New Hebrides. Rey, that's the center of the board. Hell, if I had those two Marine Divisions free, that's where I'd hit them next, and forget about MacArthur and his delusion of taking Rabaul for at least another six months."

That put a light in Admiral King's eye, for it was a plan he had contemplated himself, and Nimitz had come to the same conclusion. If the Navy was going to have any offensive punch beyond hitting enemy ports and airfields, it needed those two Marine Divisions, and free and clear of MacArthur's interference. Yet there was MacArthur, clamoring for carriers, planning his attack towards Papua, as if the Fiji problem was simply beneath his notice, something the Navy had done to encumber his Army divisions with garrison duty.

"The only way we'd be able to free up the Marines is if MacArthur agreed to take over the fight on Fiji. That would mean he'd have to bring in two of his three divisions to stand in for our Marines. You think he'd agree to that?"

"It would throw the whole ground offensive to him," said Nimitz, "just what his lordship wants. And it would leave the Marine divisions under our control, and give us freedom to move."

"I like it," said King. "In fact, I had the very same idea, and now I think I'll take it to Marshall."

“How will you get him to agree?”

“Oh, I’m an old cuss if ever there was one. I’ll just dig in my heels and refuse to relinquish command of the Marines to MacArthur. Then, when the whole thing is at loggerheads, I’ll let it slip that if MacArthur and the Army want to run the show then he ought to move his own troops in. Marshall will bite at that. He’s a master of the art of compromise. If I let slip that he has an opening there, he’ll run with it.”

“Good enough,” said Nimitz. “But realize this will delay things a bit. It will take time to swap out divisions, even if MacArthur agrees, so that means we’re likely looking at January of 43 before we can roll.”

“The carriers won’t be ready till then anyway.”

“Yes, but realize this would mean MacArthur would also have to abandon his idea about moving through the Coral Sea to Papua New Guinea.”

“Well, all we can do is offer the compromise. Let’s see what Marshall and the Joint Chiefs say about it.” King knew the final decision would have to rest there with the Joint Chiefs.

“You realize this also assumes we can control the waters around the Fiji Group during the transition,” said Nimitz.

“We’ll just have to time it right, so we’ll need good reconnaissance. The Japs have been rotating carriers to cover Fiji, but occasionally they pull everything back to Truk or Rabaul. We find a window like that, and Spruance can move in quick from Pago Pago and we can get the 25th Division to Suva. The Marines can get on those same boats and off they go. Give them a few weeks in Samoa to rest up, bring in the 2nd Marines, and we’re ready to go to bat against the Japs with more punch than just those carriers.”

“That’s where this business regarding Efate and Luganville matters,” said Nimitz. “If they take the bait and move the *Kido Butai* in to contest that operation, then we damn well have to beat them there. If we don’t, then it comes down to the ground battle for Fiji, and we’ll have to put the Marines right back where they started. We won’t be able to cover any major move of other divisions from Australia either. So everything hinges on the carriers. We’ve simply got to win this next fight.”

“I have every confidence in that,” said King. “Halsey did a fine job when he mixed it up with the Japs. Yes, we got hurt, but he landed a lot of leather on them, and they damn well felt it. My bet is that he’ll do the same this time out. Even if we do get hurt again, he’ll hammer them darn good and send

them packing for Rabaul or Truk to lick their wounds. That's when I want those two Marine Divisions ready to move. We've got those three fast battleships at Pago Pago. They can lead in an assault and we can take ground."

"In the New Hebrides?"

"Where else? If we take Efate and Luganville on Espiritu Santo, then we start flanking Noumea and also throw up a defensive front there to protect our shipping to Fiji and Samoa. With those two Marine Divisions, we can take both those islands. You know damn well the Japs will build up there soon. Their bombers can operate there and raid Suva every day. Noumea is just too far for them to do that now, and basing bombers on Fiji itself is too risky. We hit their airfields damn near every day, just like they hit Suva."

"It's risky," said Nimitz. "If we put those Marines into the New Hebrides, we'll have to be able to support them."

"That's why this next carrier fight matters so much. In the meantime, I've got to win the fight against MacArthur first."

King took the whole plan to Marshall, and in the sly way he had devised, a mix of fiery intransigence and then laying out his suggestion about MacArthur taking over the whole operation on Fiji. Marshall bit, just as he thought, and the Joint Chiefs agreed to the idea. The only obstacle now was MacArthur, and Marshall's skill as a negotiator became invaluable. He ordered MacArthur to meet him in Pearl Harbor to see if he could hammer out a final agreement.

"Fiji?" said MacArthur. "We ought to be hitting Noumea with my troops. That will allow us to cover the flank of my move on Papua New Guinea."

"True, but we aren't ready to hit Noumea yet—not with two Japanese divisions and air squadrons behind us on Fiji. Besides, there are political considerations here. When the Japanese took Port Moresby and bombed Darwin, the Australians yanked three divisions out of the Middle East and, lo and behold, we lost Java, Burma, and Ceylon. Now they've jumped on Fiji, and folks down in New Zealand are afraid the enemy will be on their doorstep tomorrow morning. They want to recall their 2nd New Zealand Division from North Africa, and that has Churchill all in a tither again. Don't you see? The New Zealanders see Fiji as their northern shield. If that falls, then what's to stop the Japs from pushing right down through the Kermadec Islands to Auckland, or even Wellington? By god, from there they would

control the Tasman Sea and cut off all shipping to Melbourne and Brisbane. We simply can't allow that, so we need Fiji before we move any further. The Joint Chiefs agree, and they want you to kick the Japanese behinds out of there."

"Me? The Army only has the 23rd Division in that fight. I thought the Marines were going to do the job there."

"1st Marine did the heavy lifting," said Marshall. "They landed in the thick of things last summer and stopped the Japanese push for Suva. Now we have the center and east, but the Japs control the west end of the island. The Joint Chiefs want you to take full authority there and wrap things up."

"Including the Marines?"

"There's the rub," said Marshall. "Admiral King wants Nimitz to retain control of the two Marine Divisions."

"Dual command? That won't do at all. It'll muddle the whole operation up. It's already bad enough that we have both Army Air Squadrons and Marine Squadrons at Suva."

"That can't be helped. When the carriers pulled out we had to rely on those airfields, and threw every good fighter squadron we had in there."

"Why doesn't King just land the 2nd Marine Division and finish up there, while I plan for Noumea and New Guinea?"

"Because that would mean we'd have to take the 23rd Division away from you, and probably the 37th as well—unity of command and all..."

"What? Those are Army Divisions. You can't seriously be contemplating turning them over to Navy control."

"No, what we want is for *you* to take over. King wants to pull the 1st Marine Division off, and move in the 25th Infantry from Pago Pago. He wants offensive capability for the Navy to threaten the New Hebrides. So here's what the Joint Chiefs have decided. You'll take the 23rd, 37th, and 25th. Then pick anything else you have in the nest at Brisbane, and the Navy has agreed to move it to Suva at the first opportunity. You'll have all the force you need to stomp on the Japanese and wrap this thing up. At the same time, King wants to take his Marines in to go after Efate and Luganville. That flanks Noumea, and then you move from Fiji to take that place. After that, we roll with your plan to move north, but we simply have to clean house on Fiji first. I've taken this to the President as well, and he's approved the whole thing. So that's the offer. You can either step in now and lead, or I'll have to

turn it over to Nimitz and the Marines. In that case, we can do nothing for you until that operation concludes, and you and all your forces, will just be sitting there in Brisbane twiddling your thumbs for another two or three months.”

MacArthur frowned. “Yet if we committed those same troops to New Caledonia, Fiji would be bypassed and fall like ripe fruit. They couldn’t supply it any longer.”

“Says who? That depends on the Navy, and there’s no guarantee we can assure naval control of those sea lanes. The President doesn’t want that. He wants certainty. He wants something more direct. With Churchill foaming at the mouth and New Zealand clamoring for help, would you leave such a strong enemy force unfought in your rear like that?”

It was an argument MacArthur would once make when the Navy would propose bypassing the Philippines later in the war, and he was silent for a moment, taking a long drag on his iconic pipe. “I’ll have complete authority there?” he asked again.

“It’ll be your show,” said Marshall. “And your headlines as well.” He smiled.

“Alright,” said MacArthur. “I’ll agree, but on one condition. After I take Fiji, we go for Noumea as I’ve already planned.”

“I think I can sell that,” said Marshall.

So it was decided. Marshall had one the first battle, ending the long simmering rivalry between his Theater Commanders, and now they could finally face the real enemy, Imperial Japan.

Chapter 2

The Japanese *Operation FS* had been a shock to both sides. As it struggled to stop the enemy, the American Navy had been just good enough to inflict serious harm on the *Kido Butai*, prompting Yamamoto to withdraw his carriers to refit and replenish at Truk and Rabaul. At the same time, Halsey had been hospitalized and Spruance took over with the last two US flattops, *Enterprise* and *Hornet*. His orders were to preserve those ships at all costs, and so he would be restricted to light raiding against Japanese supply convoys, and had to withdraw at the approach of any enemy carrier force.

For their part, the Japanese wanted no further carrier action in late 1942, concentrating on both their northern front in the Sea of Okhotsk, and then in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean for their highly successful operation to seize Ceylon and drive the British fleet back to Madagascar. In the Fiji Group, they would send one carrier division to watch over supply runs to Nandi Bay, but did not willfully seek out their enemy. All eyes were now on the land battle joined on the big island of Viti Levu, but it did not go as the Japanese had planned and hoped.

For the Army, the shock of seeing the Sakaguchi Detachment halted as it advanced on Suva from the north, then seeing it pushed back to Tavua by the American Marines, was yet another unexpected development. This was the Army that had overcome 100,000 British and Commonwealth troops in Malaya. Until that last stubborn defense put up by Montgomery on Singapore Island, it had been an unbeatable force in every engagement. Now it found itself retreating from American Marines, the burn of shame hot on the back of Sakaguchi's neck. This had not happened in the Philippines, or anywhere else. That it happened there on far flung Fiji was most alarming.

The Army's reaction was swift and predictable. Yamamoto first thought that they would claim the objective was too distant to adequately support the troops, and then blame the defeat on the Navy, but that was not what happened. Their pride and honor at stake, they doubled down, calling on some of the very same divisions that had delivered those stunning early victories. A single regiment had not been enough they realized. Now, with at least two American Divisions landed in the Fiji Group, they would need a

much stronger force to prevail. Sakaguchi was ordered to dig in a little east of Tavua in the north and await reinforcements.

The 38th Division had taken Hong Kong, the 48th had taken Manila, then both had stormed into the Dutch East Indies, sweeping through Borneo and on to Java. They were quickly sent to the fight, the 38th arriving first, and Army planners smiled to note that the 38th Division, with only two regiments landed on the main island, had nonetheless taken Nandi and pushed south to Queen's Road, driving the two Fiji Brigades before them as they expected. Then they met the Americans.

In this instance, it was the 23rd Pacifica Division, certainly every bit as raw and untested as any of the US divisions shipped so hastily to the Pacific Theater. Yet Alexander 'Sandy' Patch had his entire outfit, the last regiment shipping in from Tonga, and he had a mission—eliminate all Japanese forces operating in the Fiji Island Group. Before he could do that, he had to show the enemy who was boss on Viti Levu, and used the sheer mass of the force he had in hand to halt the Japanese advance, which was exactly what he did.

The Japanese reacted by first claiming the 38th Division was lacking its third regiment, and pressed the Navy to deliver. In their eyes, it was the lack of transport shipping, and ill-coordinated maneuvers by the Navy that were the root of the problem. Once ashore, however, there could be no further excuses. The 38th was indeed stopped at the line of the Singatana River, and then, when the Marines had pushed the Sakaguchi Detachment in the north to the point of near collapse, considerable forces had to be withdrawn from the south and sent by rail to hold the line just east of Tavua.

It was clear that more forces were required, and when the Navy finally delivered the 48th Division, the heroes of Manila relieved the remainder of the 38th Division, and took over defense of the south, but considerable amounts of ground had been yielded in the process. The Americans, with troops closer at hand in New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa, and a good harbor at Suva Bay, had simply been able to deliver more forces to the island at a critical time to tip the balance in their favor. By the time the whole of the 48th Division was on the island, the Japanese defensive line had been established at Momi Bay on the southwest coast. There they dug in, receiving much needed supplies and waiting for their artillery to be delivered in the final convoys of late December. Now it was time to fight again.

Strategically, the Japanese only controlled about a third of the island as

1943 dawned. The last month of 1942 had seen the US relieve the 1st Marine Division with the 25th “Tropic Lightning” Division from Pago Pago, and it was now holding the line against General Sano’s 38th, about 10 kilometers east of the airfield and port at Tavua in the north. From there, roads led south into the highlands, where the Japanese had found a valuable resource in the gold mine near Vatukoula, and the General had a full battalion working there to pull whatever they could from the mine and stockpile it at the west coast ports for shipment to Japan. The newly arrived 48th Division held the western third of the island, and those ports were at Lautoka, Nandi, and the smaller landing facilities at Momi Bay.

General Shuichi Miyazaki, Chief of Staff for 17th Army, had come ashore personally to direct the landings, with his HQ at Lautoka. He reported directly to the Army Commander, General Harukichi Hyakutake in Rabaul. Midway between Tavua and Nandi, Lautoka was connected to both of those sites by the single rail line on the island, a real advantage that the Japanese now possessed in being able to shift forces back and forth from one front to another. The limited rolling stock was therefore a prime target for US planes based at Suva, and many duels were fought over those thin steel rails, with Japanese planes flying from the main field at Nandi. That air duel was a prelude to the ground action that would soon follow, for with the carriers absent, both sides had been relying on land based air power to try and wrest control of the airspace from each other.

The Japanese had a small field at Tavua, and a better one at M’ba (pronounced ‘Emba’), some miles to the east. Then their main field was at Nandi, where Late December had seen the arrival of better planes and pilots. Rear Admiral Sadayoshi Yamada was leading the Japanese 5th Air Attack Force at far off Noumea on New Caledonia. That was where the Japanese based most of their long-range bombers, but being 825 miles to Suva, the distance to Fiji strained and limited their operations. For this reason, the Japanese were now looking at the New Hebrides as better sites to bring in their G3M *Rikko* bombers, (the Nell), and the reliable G4M *Hamaki*, which meant Leaf Roll, due to the shape of the plane’s rounded fuselage. The allies simply called it the Betty. Efate was only 660 miles from Suva Bay, a much easier ride for those bombers.

On the main Fiji Group island of Viti Levu, the Japanese now had some of their very best aviators in the *Tainan Kokutai* Group. That unit was flush

with many of Japan's top aces, Hiroyoshi Nishizawa with 36 kills and many more assists that pushed his total to 87, Saburō Sakai with 28, (though Sakai himself claimed 64). Toshio Ōta got 34 enemy planes, and Junichi Sasai, Japan's 'Flying Tiger,' had 27 kills. By late December, eighteen more Zeroes had come with them to relieve the cumbersome A5M Claude fighters that had been slowly outclassed as the Marine squadrons arrived near Suva. More fighters were moving down the Solomons to Tulagi, intending to continue on to Fiji.

For their part, the Americans had decided they would not try to rely on the airfield near Suva, and looked to the big island northwest, Vanua Levu, where a big effort had been made to build air bases the last three months of 1942. There were new fields at Bua on the western end of that island, at Lambasa in the center, at Savu Savu in the south, and Natewa in the east. Fields were also thrown up at Katherine Bay on the small Rambi Island, and at Matei on the larger Taveuni Island. Some were just small "dispersal" fields where planes could deploy or land if the main fields were hit too hard by the enemy, and they were mostly waiting to receive their planes to flesh out the squadrons building up in the region. But collectively, they provided that unsinkable aircraft carrier on station 24/7, and a means of contesting or controlling the air space over Fiji.

In the old history, the initial buildup of planes on Guadalcanal's Henderson Field had been called the "Cactus Air Force" because of the Allied code word "Cactus" for that island. In this history, the code name for Fiji was "Fantan," and so the early Allied air command over the islands was now simply "Fantan Force."

Conditions on Fiji were far superior to those the Marine aviators faced on Guadalcanal. There they lived in muddy tents in a Coconut plantation they came to call "Mosquito Grove." Fantan Force enjoyed far more plush accommodations in Suva, where the off-duty pilots could even get berthings at the Grand Pacific Hotel overlooking the stunning beaches. In addition to the main airfield at Nasouri near Suva, the Seabees had also hammered out a new field to the north where 1st Marine Division had been using Viti Levu Bay as its logistical base. Lighters and local steamers would come and go there with supplies, and so a field was built near Korovou south of the bay to provide rapid air cover. That, if anything, was the Henderson Field for the Marines on this island, a more wild and undeveloped region, with more

Spartan conditions.

The Japanese had those three good airfields to the west, and so every day, just after noon, the main US fields would be visited by the enemy, and little fighter duels would be fought over the eastern end of the island. If the fields got hit particularly hard, Marine flyers would make it a point of honor to go in and hit the Japanese back, bombing and strafing for a little payback.

Commander, Aircraft, Fiji, or ComAirFANTAN was General Roy Geiger, who arrived in September of 1942 to set up the 1st Marine Air Wing. That was the one bone that King had also thrown to MacArthur. He could command those units until the Navy needed them, or suitable Army Air Squadrons could be brought in to replace them. A tough and demanding officer, Geiger pulled the sometimes vigilante temperament of the Marine flyers together very quickly. There were some good men under his command, including “Smoky Joe” Foss, who would get 26 kills in the war. Pappy Boyington would later join the group as well and lead his legendary “Black Sheep Squadron.”

Even as planes on either side were being drawn to this theater, both sides were also now committing the bulk of all the ground forces they had available in theater. The Americans had completed the shipment of the 25th Tropic Lightning Division from Hawaii to relieve the 1st USMC Division as Nimitz wanted. The last convoys were harassed by the Japanese A5M Claude fighters trying to bomb them with little result.

The American plan was a simple one. Sandy Patch and his 23rd would drive up Queen’s Road in the south towards Nandi, and Collins in the North would take his 25th Tropic Lightning Division along King’s Road, through Tavua to M’ba. The Corps commander MacArthur had selected, General Krueger, wanted one more division behind the 25th up north, but it did not look like anything would get there in time. The expedient would be to take one of the three Regiments from the 37th Division on Vanua Levu, and use it as his reserve. In effect, he was making the 25th a Square Division again, as he saw that front as the more difficult mission.

General Joseph Lawton Collins would walk the King’s Road, a man with a no-nonsense disposition, hard driving spirit, and excellent skills as an administrator. Collins had his troops out on the slopes of Oahu, training hard from the moment he took command. As he was setting up his Unit Codes, he hung the name “Lightning Joe” on his own Division HQ post, and the name

stuck to him ever thereafter.

* * *

When General Krueger had his farewell conference with Marine Commander Vandegrift at Suva to plan the redistribution of forces, he put his finger squarely on the round heart of the island, and made a fateful pronouncement. "This is the war here," he said. "They've dumped virtually everything they have onto this island, and so will we. Whoever wins this thing is going to win this war, and that has to be us. How soon will fresh forces from Australia come up?"

"As soon as MacArthur makes his pick of the litter," said Vandegrift. He's got the 32nd, 38th and 41st down there, but for my money I'd ask for the 6th or 7th Australian Divisions. Those men have some hard fighting under their belts and they know what they're doing. We'll be facing some equally tough troops here. We were up against Sano's 38th up north. They call it the 'Swamp' Division, a good name for it I suppose. The whole area near Tavua has a lot of Mangrove swamps off the coast. Those are the bastards that took Hong Kong, then they moved them into the Java invasion that eventually ran Montgomery off that island."

Krueger nodded. "Then I'll want two more divisions, one up north to work with the 25th, and one down south behind the 23rd. That'll double team them at both ends of the island, and we can make our push."

"I wouldn't hold your breath," said Vandegrift. The best you'll get in the short run is that extra RCT from Vanua Levu from the 37th."

"But without those troops, I can keep pressure on the southern road, but we're up against the entire 48th Division down there now. Advancing to Nandi won't be easy."

"Yup," said Vandegrift. "They've doubled down alright. But Halsey is back, and with a lot of new carriers. Things will be heating up as soon as he gets here."

"I'll bet that has MacArthur seeing red," said Krueger. "He's been wanting to get into this war for a long time, complaining the Navy has given him the short end of the stick for the last six months. He's got all those Divisions in Australia, and there they sit. The man had it in his mind to make a move on New Guinea, and while there's plenty of shipping available,

there's no carrier support for air cover."

"Hell," said Vandegrift. "After that riot in the Koro Sea last May there's been no carrier air support down here for anyone. It's our Marine Squadrons that have done the heavy lifting, and you're lucky Nimitz left them behind."

"Just the same, Big Mac is getting real antsy down under, and he wants to get in the ring now that they've turned the show over to the Army. He says he's 'bitterly disappointed' at what he calls the foot dragging in Washington. Says the support he was getting was 'entirely inadequate.'" Krueger emphasized the quotes with his fingers in the air. "I suppose I don't blame him. I'd bellyache too if I were stuck down there in Brisbane when the real fight was right here. In fact, the troops in Australia are wound up tighter than a spring. There was a good deal of street fighting I'm told, and not just the typical barroom brawls. They damn near had a riot in Brisbane, with the Aussies and Yanks at each other's throats. So when Halsey gets back, you can bet MacArthur will be after him for carriers. He still thinks he's going to Papua New Guinea—said he wanted to discuss that whole operation for me after we finish up here on Fiji."

"MacArthur did more than that," said Vandegrift. "Nimitz told me he bent Curtin's ear to see if he could persuade Churchill to send him a British carrier! Can you imagine that?"

"Hell, they lost two flattops the first time they mixed it up with the Japs, and then they lost Ceylon to boot. No, his majesty won't get any help from the Brits, nor will we. This is our war out here."

"Well get this... MacArthur's little end around through Curtin and Churchill ticked off General Marshall to no end. He had Roosevelt explain the whole situation to MacArthur, but the man would not let it go. After being told he would have to get by with those divisions in Australia, and by the President himself, MacArthur sent a cable the next day demanding two aircraft carriers, another 500 planes and one more first-class infantry division. That man has bigger balls than Genghis Khan. If no more US divisions were to be allocated to his command, he then suggested that the President ask Churchill to lend him the British 18th Division at Perth!"

"Doesn't he realize that if we don't stop the Japs here in the Fiji Group, he may not get anything more for Australia at all? If they beat us here, then Samoa is next. They take that, and this thing is over." Krueger was a hard fighter, but he could read a map. "Like I told you, he still has Papua New

Guinea on his mind. Since the Aussies still have Milne Bay, MacArthur wants to transfer all the Ack Ack and air groups from Melbourne and Brisbane to Townsville and Cairns in the North. Then he wants to build a new air strip between Milne Bay and Port Moresby on the coast there. I got briefed on that when I was over in Melbourne last month. MacArthur is calling this new imaginary airfield by the code name BOSTON, but I guess he never stopped to think the place would be under Jap air attack from Moresby the whole time it's being built." Krueger shook his head dismissively.

"Right," said Vandegrift. "Then he'll want to march right on up through the Bismarcks to Rabaul."

"Hell," said Krueger, "I'd be happy to go over there and do exactly that, but not with this much Japanese force here in Fiji."

"It's the Philippines he really wants," said Vandegrift. "New Guinea is just a staircase he has to climb to get back to his private little kingdom there. He never did get over being run out of the place."

"I hear Nimitz doesn't want it. He's of a mind to bypass the Phils and just leapfrog along Pacific Islands, all the way to Japan. That'll keep your Marines nice and busy. If MacArthur wins that argument, I guess he'll want the Army to do the job in Papua New Guinea."

"I expect we'll find out what's up soon enough. First things first—we've got to push the Japs off this island, and now it looks like they've handed the job to MacArthur. You get along with his majesty?"

"He's just another CO," said Krueger. "He'll call the shots, but I'm the man on the ground getting things done. Fine with me."

"When do you figure you'll be ready to go after the Japs?"

"January. That's when we're scheduled to receive reinforcements from Brisbane. What about you, Archie? When do those fighting leathernecks of yours get back in the game?"

"God only knows," said Vandegrift. "I'm told my boys get two weeks off in Samoa. After that, they'll have something in mind. I can smell another big carrier battle shaping up here soon, and I suppose that will decide the matter."

That wasn't a hard thing to predict, but Archie Vandegrift was correct.

Chapter 3

The Nimitz Plan

As for the Navy, the Fiji Group was not the only thing on the minds of Navy planners. Now ready to go on the offensive, the Americans had moved both Marine Divisions to Samoa and they were waiting for the first clear opportunity to push into the New Hebrides, a place singled out by both Nimitz and King as the key to flanking the Japanese on both Fiji and New Caledonia.

“The initial objective will be this island,” said Nimitz. *Eh-fa-tah*, but for some damn reason the spell it Efate. The code name is ROSES. They wanted to change it to TRUCULENCE, but who wants to try and spell that on a thousand reports?”

“It doesn’t matter how they spell it,” said Halsey. “A rose is a rose by any other name. Where do I hit it?”

“Right here, at Port Vila on the southwest coast. There’s a decent small harbor there, but the bay beyond it gets a lot of rough swell. The place flanks Noumea, and if we get some good fighter groups in there, we can cut off their LOC to New Caledonia. Up north here at Havana Harbor there’s room for a seaplane base as well. We’ll take it with a single regiment, the 8th Marines. That’s job one, and this base will support any move we make on New Caledonia.”

“And job two?” Halsey was ready for more.

“Espiritu Santo,” said Nimitz. “That’s what we want next. It’s the largest island in the New Hebrides, and there’s an excellent anchorage at Luganville. From there we can throw up fighter and bomber fields and then build the place up for any move we might have to make into the Solomons. It’s perfect.”

“Japanese?” asked Halsey.

“None to speak of. They put all their chips in the Fiji Group. The French have a battalion from their Tonkin Division there, but they won’t fight.”

“Alright, how you gonna hit the place?”

“I want to put the other two regiments of 2nd Marines in there, with one landing up here in the north at Saint James Bay, and the other right at Luganville.”

“Two Regiments?”

“We won’t need both to take the place, but we might need them to hold it,” said Nimitz. “That will also give me enough to jump on anything else we

might need. We'll follow up with a Marine Defense Battalion, Naval construction troops, the works."

Nimitz had put his finger on the island that would become the largest US Naval operating base in the South Pacific. Before the war ended in Fedorov's history, two fighter fields and three bomber fields would be built there, along with a seaplane base, coastal guns of the 155th CD Regiment, massive supply and ammunition depots, a naval repair dock, and even aircraft engine shops and facilities to service and store torpedoes for both planes and subs. As many as 100,000 men would be based on the island, and over 2 million would pass through it enroute to other objectives. If taken here, it would likely replace Suva Bay as the US forward operating base for the Solomons Campaign, just as it did in the old history.

"So I'll want us to form up here, about 100 miles northwest of those islands. We'll only have to use one carrier to hit anything the French have on them, and the remainder can wait for the Japs. In fact, we have the 1st Parachute Battalion available to pioneer this landing. We can take them out to sea with us, escorted by *Antietam*. The main landings won't be authorized unless we can assure sea control."

"What if they don't come after us?"

"All the better," said Nimitz. "Then we bring in the Marines, and stand there with a chip on our shoulder to see if the other fellow wants to do anything about it. Don't worry Bull, they'll come. They wouldn't leave a mug like yours off their dance card."

Halsey grinned at that. "All that R & R in Pearl did wonders for me," he said. "I feel like a new man."

"And you've got a whole new fleet. Spruance has *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, and you take in the three new Essex Class carriers. Where will you plant your flag?"

"Essex," said Halsey. "I thought I might go with the *Lexington*, but first in the class always gets the nod. Besides, that ship and crew have had more time to work in."

"A good choice. How are the air wings shaping up?"

"We've been running drills for the last week. I've got 38 F4U Corsairs, and they look good. *Yorktown* still has the older Wildcats, but they honored *Lexington* with a couple dozen of those hot new F6Fs."

"Those are the first of the new planes we'll be getting," said Nimitz.

“They’ve been burning the midnight oil at the drafting tables for the last year. You’d be amazed at what we have coming.”

On both sides of the war, designers were busy with prototypes and handing them off to test pilots for evaluation. Ronnie Harker was one of those rare men when he got into a plane, another great British test pilot like Winkle Brown, who had a magic touch when he flew. Harker had his eye on a newcomer, and he first fell in love with it in April of 1942.

A latecomer to the dance, it was the P-51, rolled out of the design bays in a little over 100 days after the contract was signed. Oddly, the plane had been built for the British, who were looking for something new as they shopped American built planes to help flesh out new RAF squadrons. The Curtiss P-40 was getting long in the tooth, so they asked for something else. They specified the engine they wanted, the Allison V-1710, and the price they would pay. The North American 73, or NA-73, started test flights and had some very promising features.

The airfoils created very little drag, and the heated engine exhaust had the effect of giving the plane a little boost akin to that of a rocket thrust, called the “Meredith Effect,” after a British engineer who proposed that extra heat from a liquid cooled engine could be put to this use. The Supermarine Spitfires already benefited from the effect, but this plane delighted early fliers when it was found to be faster than even the latest model Spitfires at low to medium altitudes. It also handled extremely well, at least under 15,000 feet, but RAF test pilot Ronnie Harker didn’t like what he was seeing with the plane above that altitude.

“It’s a bit sluggish up there,” he said. “Put a Rolls Royce engine in it and we might have a much better plane.” Harker might be forgiven for being just a little biased in making such a suggestion, for he was actually employed by Rolls Royce at the time, their very first test pilot looking over new aircraft proposed for the RAF.

“I was impressed with it under 15,000 feet as well,” said Wing Commander Campbell-Orde. “But what could it do that the Spitfire hasn’t already done?”

“It’s faster than the Mark V,” said Harker.

“Yes, well now we’ve got the Mark IX to go after the German FW-190s.”

“Throw in a Merlin-61 and it will be faster than the Mark IX, and probably perform like a dance queen at high altitude.”

Perhaps Harker was simply selling, like any good company man might, but his prediction would turn out to be very true. In October of 42, they did put a Merlin engine in the plane and it was everything Harker said it would be, and more. One other feature of the plane was its built-in reserve fuel tanks which gave it very long range. It could fly 1650 miles, a thousand miles farther than the plane it had been designed to replace, the Curtiss P-40. That got the light winking in the eyes of the American bomber advocates, and was largely responsible for getting the US interested in this new design.

Before the war, US theory on strategic bombing was built on the assumption that heavily armed planes like the B-17 “Flying Fortress” would be able to easily defend themselves and always get through to their targets. Even as the war came, the Army Air Force thought of the B-17 as its premier offensive weapon, and the US urged round the clock bombing against Germany, with the US flying the day operations. With most of the Luftwaffe in Russia, that worked for a time, until Germany answered the treat by simply transferring more of their excellent Bf-109 squadrons to the west, and then introduced the fearsome Focke Wulf 190. It was soon found that the B-17 was vulnerable against these excellent fighters and the pilots that flew them, so much so that daylight bombing had to be cancelled.

The US 8th Air force took the buzz about the new P-51 to heart, particularly when they heard about that tremendous range. No fighter had the range to accompany the bombers effectively before the P-51, and with that new engine making the plane more than a match for anything it would face, a legend was born. It could outfight the German 109s, and match the 190s as well. The British Spitfire IX could make 368 MPH at high altitude, but with that new Merlin engine, the Mustang could go over 430 MPH. Yet for the 8th Airforce, it had the only real quality that mattered—range.

Unbeknownst to Ronnie Harker, there were other contenders to the throne in the realm of fighter performance. The American designers wanting to protect those bombers had first thought to go with a twin-engine plane like the P-38, which was almost as fast as the Mustang at 414 MPH, and had a range of 1300 miles. It could do everything, flying as an interceptor, light bomber for ground attack, and it was also a good night fighter and recon plane. Over 10,000 would be built, but there was another plane that was much better that was overlooked.... In Fedorov’s history.

That plane was the Grumman F7F Tigercat, another sleek twin engine

design that was so fast that it could simply run away from the Navy's hot new single engine fighter, the F6F Hellcat. With four 20mm cannons and four more .50 caliber MGs, it could outpunch any fighter it encountered, and had hard points that could carry both bombs *and* torpedoes. The Navy took a pass on the plane when it failed carrier qualifications, being too fast on landing, and too heavy. But the Marines eyed the plane with a good deal of interest. Only 12 were ever built during the war in the old history, but in these events, another man like Ronnie Harker was out to change history.

His name was Captain Fred Trapnell, a hot shot test pilot for the Navy who thought he was sitting in the best fighter he had ever flown when he took the prototype up. He had been flying a captured Zero to see just what the magic was in that plane. The Navy wanted to beat it, and they were hoping the F6F would do the job. It would, and Trapnell's recommendation on the F7F would not supplant the Hellcats on the decks of US carriers—but it would convince the Marines to push hard for the plane. It could achieve altitudes of 40,000 feet, hit hard, serve in any role like the P-38, and the Marines wanted it. They would see that production moved from 12 to over 250, and a good deal earlier than the Tigercats ever saw the skies over the Pacific in the old history.

So it was that the ships that never were would also be joined by planes that never got their chance in the war. The F7F Tigercat would be a notable performer for the Marines in good time. Another newcomer would be the Boeing F8F "Bearcat." It was a single seater, yet the biggest and heaviest ever built by the US. A "Five fingered plane" it was designed to perform five crucial roles, as a fighter, interceptor, dive bomber, torpedo bomber, or level bomber. To do that job, it had even more punch than the Tigercat, with six 20mm cannons and six MGs. It was yet another nightmare on the drafting tables that the Japanese would have to face before this was over—a plane that could fly off the decks of US carriers that were cruising outside the range of the best Japanese land based fighters. Again, that range was a critical factor in the Pacific, and the Bearcats could fly an astonishing 2800 miles, twice that of the fabled Mustang.

All of this would pose a real challenge for Japan, but there was one more man fiddling with the history, and his name was Ivan Volkov. He had quietly told the Japanese about things on the US Drawing boards, and urged them to respond. When Karpov opened the northern front by taking Kamchatka and

invading Sakhalin Island, Volkov approached the Japanese again with dire warnings. America was building a new bomber, he told them, with very long range and the hitting power to lay waste to Japanese cities if it was not stopped. The “bomber threat” would lead Japan to design a number of excellent interceptors, and this threat, combined with the defeat of her carriers, channeled production away from better carrier capable planes.

The Army was already working on a promising interceptor designed by Nakajima, the Ki-84 *Hayate*, or “Gale.” This plane, called Frank by the Allies, began to appear in Mid-1943 in the real history, and Volkov was attempting to move that development along faster. He would also offer technical support for designs like the Nakajima Ki-87, a radial engine fighter with an exhaust driven turbo-supercharger that could take two 30mm cannon and two more 20mm guns to 42,000 feet, and at 433MPH. There was a bomber interceptor that might have a dramatic impact on the war, and Volkov was doing everything possible to see that it was developed early.

Another challenger was the Mitsubishi Ki-83, a long range twin engine fighter that was first inspired by the appearance of the American P-38. The Mitsubishi version had the same hitting power of the Ki-87, but a range of just over 1200 miles. The Japanese had not called for such designs until 1943, when it was already too late to see them produced. Volkov had called for them in 1941, and delivered secret documents to designers like Tomio Kubo working for Mitsubishi. He made sure the Takajima company was also in the race with their Ki-94, a sweet high altitude interceptor that incorporated many features being built into the American Mustangs. Tatsuo Hasegawa was the man behind the plane, and Volkov also passed him documents to smooth the way toward his vision.

A third designer, Miki Tadano, had dreams of speed from an early age and would one day design Japan’s first “Bullet Train.” In WWII, he put his imagination and skills to work on the design of a bomber that would be as fast as a Zero, but have the range of a G3M, the plane the Allies called “Betty.” They would call his new brainchild “Francis,” the P1Y Medium Bomber, and it would come to production a full six months early. That was the plane the Navy would choose to carry its Okha Cherry Blossom man-guided missile bombs, though no one knew that just yet.

When Yamamoto learned how the war once ended, he was also deeply disturbed. Dazzled by the performance of Naval rockets as both a strike and

defensive weapon, he initially hoped Japan would be able to produce them. When he learned of the Okha Cherry Blossom project, and the entire notion of the *Kamikaze* behind it, he shrugged, wanting something more than such desperate measures.

While the Zero was still an excellent fighter, the Navy knew it would need a successor soon, and while they accepted the proposed A6M3 designs, the loss of range was a serious concern, and in this history it was rejected until that could be corrected in the A6M3-A variant, which included self-sealing gas tanks, better protection, and a radio that actually worked.

There was much more that could be done with the existing Zero, and Volkov pointed this out. Its wings could be extended and strengthened to give it much better speed and performance in a dive. The magazine could be increased to at least 100 rounds on the Type 99 cannon, and better machineguns for the wings needed at least 250 rounds. Wing mounted drop tanks extended the range. This plane would actually be put into production in mid-1942 in this reality, and it would receive the designation A6M4 *Reisen*.

Beyond that, Volkov would have another answer for Yamamoto as well, suggesting the plans for the many new bomber interceptors might be used to adapt these designs for carriers. One looked very promising, and the N1K *Shiden-Kai* would be one of those alternate history variants in this war.

In place of the “Divine Wind” to shield Japan from the ravages of US carriers and bombers, why not opt for planes capable of stopping them? The Army was eyeing the designs of the three companies mentioned above, and now the Navy wanted into the game. The N1K3-A, Model 41 *Shiden-Kai*, was finally born. The “Violet Lightning” instead of the Divine Wind would be Japan’s shield, and this one was built to fly from carriers. The Americans would come to call the NK1 “George,” perhaps the best enemy fighter they actually faced in the War in the Pacific. In the old history, only 71 came off the production lines in 1943, and no more than 1007 were ever built. Volkov was doing everything possible to see the US would face more Violet Lightning in this war, sooner, and in greater numbers... If Japan could ever build enough to matter.

The skies over the Pacific would soon be darker and more dangerous, for these superb piston and prop designs would fly much sooner. Production, not design, was now the great liability for Japan. In 1942, the Empire built 8,861 new planes of all types. They would nearly double that number in 1943,

building 16,693. In that same time period, the United States built 47,836 planes in 1942, and 85,898 more in 1943. If only a third of those went to the Pacific, the Americans would still bring twice as many planes to the war as Japan in those years. In 1944, the US would build 96,318 new planes, more than Japan, Germany, and the UK combined. That was the grim reality that Yamamoto feared when Japan awoke the sleeping giant.

For now, however, Halsey could only crow about the Navy's new Fighter and torpedo bombers beginning to arrive in small numbers. "If this new Hellcat is as good as they say, our boys will do a whole lot better against the Jap Zero," he said. "And *Lexington* has all new TBD-5s and the new Avenger torpedo bombers in her strike wings. We'll see how Lady Lex looks on the dance floor with that new outfit."

"Lady Lex?" said Nimitz, somewhat surprised. "Is the crew still calling it that?"

"Naw, just me. I've a soft spot for the name. The crew has taken to calling it the Blue Ghost. I didn't think we'd have either *Lexington* or *Yorktown* this soon, but *Essex* will be glad to have company. They may be a little raw, but once those pilots get airborne, they'll know how to fight. I rounded up all the vets I could find from their old ships, so they have a bone to pick. Good men."

"Well now they get their second chance," said Nimitz. He paused, his thoughts lingering somewhere, his eyes on Halsey as he thought. "Bull," he said. "We've got to win this one. If they knock us down here, it will set us back another six months. I'm counting on you."

"Admiral, you just point me where you want me to go."

"In harm's way," said Nimitz. "And may God go with you."

Part II

Everything Honorable

“It follows then as certain as that night succeeds the day, that without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious.”

—George Washington: 15 NOV 1781

Chapter 4

Admiral Tovey had a great deal on his mind, as always, and it was also swirling around ships and planes. The losses had been mounting, and the fleet was beginning to feel the strain. The heavy cruisers have done quite well, he thought, but we've taken appalling losses among the light escort cruisers—14 ships sunk, to cut us in half in that vital category. Among the heavier ships we've lost *Prince of Wales*, *Rodney*, *Valiant*, *Malaya*, *Queen Elizabeth*, *Barham*, and then *Renown*. That's a third of the battle fleet gone, and nothing coming to replace those losses.

Now that the Torch landings have been covered and carried off, the burden is lessening somewhat, but I still have the problem of re-establishing a secure convoy route to Murmansk, and now, the loss of Ceylon has been a major setback in the Indian Ocean. Those two valuable bases at Colombo and Trincomalee are now in Japanese hands, and those equally valuable aircraft carriers, *Formidable* and *Illustrious*, went down trying to defend that island. That makes three gone now, along with *Courageous*, and only the little escort carriers have come along to replace them. I suppose Somerville was lucky he was able to save *Indomitable*. We had no business trying to mix it up with the Japanese carrier squadrons. They're just too skilled at that type of warfare, and our ships are not up to snuff when it comes to the carriers.

It was then that a knock came on the door, and in walked Admiral Fraser. Tovey had been expecting him, and the two men shook hands warmly. Fraser, along with Cunningham in the Eastern Med, was now one of Tovey's 'recruits' to the ranks of the secret organization established within the Royal Navy known as the Watch. Its original purpose had been to keep watch for a mysterious Russian raider, but those moments existed now only within the mind of Tovey himself, and that of Alan Turing. Both men had been plagued with these strange feelings of *déjà vu*, odd recollections, snippets of memories they thought they had lived, and then there was that file box in the archive at Bletchley Park that seemed to document it all.

Little by little, Tovey was waking up. He was able to take hold of those memories now, and trace them back to their roots. He was remembering.

Fraser still struggled with his own recollection of the events he experienced, unable to make any sense of the memories, which seemed to have him in the Pacific. Tovey listened with a very understanding ear when he spoke of them, but decided he could do nothing to speed things along. Fraser would either remember, or not, and in his own good time if he ever did.

Now the purpose of the Watch involved something else, still a guarded watch on the seas as always, for if one ship like the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* could appear, and then the submarine *Kazan*, the *Argos Fire*, and the Funnies, what might turn up next?

Today's meeting with Admiral Fraser was to discuss a few other mysterious ships, not at large on the high seas, but right in the slip yards and dry docks of the kingdom. A year ago, Fraser had taken some interest in the little engagement involving a pair of small American hybrid cruiser/carriers in the New Hebrides. They had intervened at a critical moment to defend a vital convoy, engaged and sunk the French carrier *Bearn*, and routed their small Pacific Squadron, and even tangled with the Japanese.

Then, during the Canary Islands, the Germans had sortied with a similar ship, deep into the South Atlantic, and scuttlebutt there was that they had taken a particularly rich prize. He found himself fascinated with the concept of the hybrid ship, and new intelligence now indicated that after the initial losses sustained in the Pacific War, the Japanese were working on several more of these vessels to quickly augment their carrier fleet. The Americans also rushed to complete two more in the same class, converting their *Cleveland* Class cruisers to these light, fast battle carriers that could carry a dozen planes.

The two men discussed that for a moment. "They might do well as convoy escorts," said Tovey. "They would have the guns and speed to get after U-boats on the surface, and the planes to spot and attack them from the air. They wouldn't stand against a serious minded German raider, but there's another issue here—the Germans. They're getting ready to commission another fleet carrier up north, and we still have to consider the two carriers they have in the Med. If they ever manage to get them all together, they'd have themselves a nice little fleet. Those *Stukas* were quite bothersome when we faced down Admiral Lütjens. *Hood* knows it, as does our lately departed *Renown*. *Repulse* is still in the dockyards as well."

"That brings me to the main point of this discussion," said Fraser,

“*Repulse*. That project is coming along nicely. In fact, I’m told the ship can start sea trials soon—a little something to ease the sting after losing *Formidable* and *Illustrious*. I didn’t think the Admiralty would listen to me when I put the idea forward. The Director of Naval Gunnery called my idea an abortion.”

“I rather think he meant abomination,” said Tovey.

“And he went so far as to say the entire concept was the result of a psychological maladjustment in naval thinking. Can you imagine that?” Fraser gave Tovey an indignant look. “Good that I had seniority over that man. *Repulse* was the perfect trial for this concept. You and I both know that trying to put more armor on her to let her stand with ships the Germans were throwing at us wasn’t going to get round the block. The day of the battlecruiser has come and gone, but the day of the aircraft carrier is well upon us now, and we need to stay in the game.”

So Fraser had put forward the idea of converting *Repulse* to a carrier, but still retaining her forward 15-inch gun turrets. All that damaged superstructure was removed, and instead of taking nine months to rebuild it, an armored flight deck was laid down in its place. The interior spaces were cleared out to allow for 24 aircraft, and Britain would now have her first hybrid battlecarrier, even faster than the *Repulse* was as a battlecruiser at 32 knots. In her first trial at sea, with all new boilers, the ship ran at 34 knots.

“Think of that ship on convoy escort,” said Fraser.

“I might do so, but the problem I have with hybrid designs is that the ship seems to have an odd sort of identity crisis. Is it a carrier, or a battleship? In either category, it becomes a weaker, less capable ship than one built with a single purpose in mind. You fight these ships quite differently. Battleships are hunters, built to intercept and destroy enemy capital ships in a good gunfight. Carriers hang back, like a woman in skirts. They flirt with their planes and wave from afar, but never want to let the other fellow get close enough to plant a kiss. So then... if I deploy *Repulse* as part of a battleship task force, perhaps as a scout, what happens if she were out in front and encountered the *Tirpitz*? She’s certainly out gunned. Just one good hit on that flight deck puts it out of business, and even two turrets up front won’t be enough to let her stand and argue with *Tirpitz*.”

“Ah, but her planes can let her find the enemy before they get close,” said Fraser. “They won’t be flirting and waving, but dropping thousand

pound bombs and torpedoes. If *Tirpitz* gets cheeky and tries to close the range, then *Repulse* has the speed to avoid an unwanted encounter, like a proper lady. Now then, suppose this German raider is something else—a young buck? A *Hipper* class heavy cruiser wouldn't dare show its face against those 15-inch guns. If such a ship gets too forward, *Repulse* would slap it easily enough. You see? It's the old argument that led us to build battlecruisers in the first place—strong enough to beat any cruiser they encounter, and fast enough to outrun anything that can outgun her.”

“Not quite,” said Tovey. “Don't forget the *Kaiser Wilhelm*. That ship has six 15-inch guns, and can run two knots faster than your new hybrid *Repulse*.”

“Academic,” said Fraser. “I'll match those 24 aircraft on *Repulse* against that third 15-inch turret on *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and we'll see who comes off the better. In any case, that nasty little *Kaiser* is nicely bottled up in the Med, where I hope we'll keep it. Without *Hindenburg* to lead the way, the Germans have kept that one safely out of the game at Toulon.”

“That's where *Bismarck* is,” said Tovey, “and the Germans are very close to getting that ship back into service. Along with the *Normandie*, now *Fredric de Gross*, they will still pose a grave threat. Another problem with *Repulse* is that she had short legs—only 4,000 nautical miles.”

“We'll get her up to 5,000 as a carrier,” Fraser put in.

“Less than half what an *Illustrious* Class carrier can give us,” Tovey countered, “and she'll carry only half as many planes. You see, when such a ship is acting as a carrier, she hasn't got punch, and a carrier has no business trying to slug it out with another ship built for surface action. All that aviation fuel and ordnance for the planes is just too volatile. So if this is something to be avoided, then why put the guns there in the first place? Why not just build a carrier?” Tovey thought he had a good argument with that, until Fraser reminded him of something.

“Do you recall that encounter with HMS *Glorious* in the Norwegian Sea?”

“Who could forget that. The young man Wells saved that ship damn near single handed, just as Admiral Volsky saved our HMS *Invincible*.”

“Well now,” Fraser smiled. “I wonder if the Twins would have wanted to mix it up with *Repulse* if they had found her. She'd be lobbing 15-inch shells their way before the Germans could close the range, and our Fulmars and

Albacores would be all over those rascals in short order.”

“I suppose you might have a point with that. Yet now that we’ve put *Gneisenau* down, the new Twins are *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*. I don’t think your new hybrid design would discourage those two sea demons.”

“Lütjens had them together in the Atlantic and we held our own,” said Fraser. “And may I remind you that it was the *Stukas* off the German carrier that put that serious damage on *Hood*.”

“Thank god we haven’t got this *Graf Zeppelin* to worry about any longer,” said Tovey. “But we do have to worry about his brother, *Peter Strasser*. Admiral, you do make some good points here. If you ask me if I’d rather have *Repulse* back as a battlecruiser, or as this hybrid, then I think I’d side with you. You are correct, the planes by far outweigh that third 15-inch turret from a military standpoint. *Repulse* might help out in the Norwegian Sea, or even in the Atlantic, I’ll grant you that, but we’ll need something a little better for the Pacific. *Implacable* and *Indefatigable* are in the works, but a long way from being ready. They’ll carry over 80 planes, just like the new American carriers, and still run at 32 knots. In the meantime, while we wait for them, Somerville is sitting on his thumbs at Madagascar and hoping the Japanese don’t get a notion to take that island as well. He’s no offensive capability at all, and can barely serve to try and safeguard the Winston Special convoys to Australia.”

“Suppose I could give you something with the same capability of *Implacable* this year,” Fraser teased. “That’s where my idea concerning those hulls for the *Lion* Class comes in. This time our Mister Goodall, the Director of Naval Construction, said I should look to building out the *Audacious* Class carrier concept on those hulls.”

“*Audacious* Class?”

“That’s the reworked carrier design with dual hangar decks. I’m afraid we won’t get anything like that in this war. But those *Lion* class hulls were just sitting there begging to be useful.”

“Ah, yes, we once thought the splendid cats were going to prowl the seas again, but work was stopped on those. I thought the orders were cancelled?”

“Not at all,” said Fraser. “My good man, I took this little problem right to the Former Naval Person to see what he might think, and did so just after the DNC wrote that cancellation order for the *Lion* Class, in 1939.”

“Indeed?” Tovey inclined his head. “And what did Mister Churchill

think?”

“Not much in the beginning, though he said he would try to see the work along, particularly on those new 16-inch gun turrets. However, shortly after *Hood* took that hit, he told me that he wanted them built out as fast carriers, and as quickly as possible. You see, if we try to build them out as fast battleships, the job will never be done in time. He agreed with my argument on that point.”

“And here I was hoping for some good fast battleships to run with *Invincible*,” said Tovey. “*Lion* is to become a carrier?”

“We won’t be using that name,” said Fraser with a wave of his hand. “Too much like the German tanks for my liking. The other two hulls were going to be *Conqueror* and *Thunderer*, a bit difficult to roll off the tongue, so I suggested *Incomparable*.”

“Four or five syllables? You should just stay with *Lion*, or you might try something like *Superb*.” Tovey looked at his good friend and colleague, curious. “Well... Don’t just sit there with that smile on your face. What about this ship?”

“*Superb*... I rather like that. Perhaps I’ll recommend it to the DNC, because it’s coming along nicely,” said Fraser with a wink. “The first two hulls were laid down before the war, and the DNC tried to cancel them shortly thereafter. That’s when I stepped up, and had my little chat with Churchill.” Fraser smiled.

“What? You mean to say they’ve been building this ship for two years, and as a carrier?”

“That’s the ticket,” said Fraser. “Fly over the damn thing and it looks like a battleship that will never be completed in any good time. Why, you could only see the beginnings of what might be the main superstructure, and one stack. But down deep, all the boilers and propulsion systems are finished, and the hangar decks have all been laid out. That bit of superstructure is the island, and now all it needs is a good armored flight deck. They’ll start building that out this week.”

“My word... This hasn’t been in any of my fleet status reports.”

“Churchill wanted it that way. He said that, if it came down to discussion at the Admiralty, there would be no end of change proposals and such, and the ship would simply never get built. So he gave the project to me, and I’ve been shepherding things along, nice and quiet like.”

“Really quite irregular,” said Tovey, though he was inwardly pleased at this news. Nobody knows everything going on in this bloody war, he thought. Not even the Commander of Home Fleet.

Chapter 5

“**Now,**” said Fraser, “they had to thin out the belt armor a wee bit to get the speed we wanted, but she’ll still have 250mm through the gut, and 150 at the bow and stern. That will handle 8-inch rounds well enough, and the two forward turrets will handle anything that throws one at her.”

“Two forward turrets?”

“They never stopped work on those, as I’m sure you know—the 16-inch guns for the original *Lion* design. But that’s all they managed to build in two years, and it was going to take another two years to finish the job. That just would not do. Admiral, a bird in hand, that’s what we have now. So we just used the two turrets we had ready, and they went on last month. The Germans still think we have half a battleship there, and with no superstructure.”

“Just as I thought,” said Tovey. “And one might think the Commander of Home Fleet might be better informed than the Abwehr!”

“Sorry John, but this was all very hush hush. Churchill insisted. Not even Pound knows the details I shared with you here.”

“And good that he doesn’t,” said Tovey.

“So then, with only A and B turrets, it saves a good deal of weight, eliminates another barbette and magazine, and increases speed to 30 knots. The main elevator area is now aft where Y turret would have been.”

“And the planes?”

“Here’s the good part,” said Fraser with a smile. “You are certainly correct about the lack of capacity on our carriers. We need planes with folding wings, just like the Americans. Well, waiting for that is like waiting for spring in November, so I suggested we just buy them from the Americans. They have good folding wing fighters and dive bombers right now. We even have a few Martlet Squadrons deployed. Only this new plane we’re getting is even better than the Martlet. The Americans are calling it the F6F Hellcat, and they’re going to build them in droves. The wings can fold hydraulically, or manually if necessary. It promises to be a good rugged plane, just what we need.”

“What about the Seafires?”

“We got 30 of the Mark IIIs. Somerville even had a dozen at Ceylon, but not enough to matter. Oddly, the damn wings won’t fold on that lot. Now what was that all about? They build a carrier fighter with wings that won’t fold! Well, we got the matter corrected, and the Seafire will make a fine plane if we can get enough of the new version with folding wings. In the meantime, we’ll take these Hellcats and put them to good use. I’m told that given the current hangar and deck space on our old *Lion*, this new hybrid can still carry 24 of them, and have enough room left over for two dozen more strike planes.”

“Why, that’s no more than *Illustrious* could carry.”

“True, but *Illustrious* didn’t have those 16-inch gun turrets up front.”

“I’m not sure they would have done her any good. She never saw the ship that launched the planes that sunk her.”

“Well,” Fraser smiled. “With two such ships, side by side, we’ll throw 96 planes into the sky, and have more firepower than the French battleship *Normandie* at our disposal at the same time.”

“Two such ships?”

“My dear man, we always build them in pairs. *Hood* and your G3 Class being the only exceptions. I like *Superb*... Think of a good name for the second one, will you?”

Tovey shrugged. “I suppose if I won’t get a new fast battleship any time soon, the hybrids will have to do.”

“I wouldn’t be so pessimistic,” said Fraser. “All the delays regarding the *Lion* class gave birth to yet another proposal. You see, the difficulty was in getting those new 16-inch guns ready—all new turrets. Yet we had perfectly good 15-in turrets stored from *Glorious* and *Courageous* when they were converted to carriers. Why not use them, or so the logic went. Those guns are tried and true.”

“Yes, I was in on that meeting,” said Tovey. “Churchill supported it as well, if I’m not mistaken—an all new fast battleship, but armed with her grandmother’s teeth.”

“They’ve made some modifications on the new project for *Vanguard*,” said Fraser. “The guns can now elevate to 30 degrees to improve range, and they’ve added additional faceplate armor and also mounted gun directors.”

“You make it sound as though the ship is already built. The last I saw of it there were still four big holes fore and aft where the turrets should be.”

“Yes, she’s not quite finished, but the guns are ready, and they might mount those turrets very quickly. So you see, you just might get one more fast battleship before long, HMS *Vanguard*.”

“I won’t hold my breath, for that ship or these hybrids you’re so fond of. The new *Knight* Class has been useful. A few more of those would fill the bill.”

“Don’t worry, the Admiralty is firmly committed to filling out the Round Table.”

“Good,” said Tovey. “If I had all these ships now, I would feel a good deal better, but more to the immediacy of our present situation, and speaking of both the Former Naval Person and Admiral Somerville, we have to consider what to do about Ceylon. The Indian Ocean Squadron is toothless now. Somerville has retreated all the way back to Madagascar and Kenya, and he can now barely serve to put out a thin cover for Cape Town and Durban. The Japanese have Trinco and Colombo, and Churchill is at his wit’s end over these developments.”

“Somerville deployed too far forward,” said Fraser. “His effort to cover Port Blair was ill considered. He should have withdrawn southwest of Ceylon, perhaps operating from Addu instead. He was lucky to save *Indomitable* and those three old battleships.”

“And the cruisers,” said Tovey.

“What do you propose we do about Ceylon?”

“The Japanese have settled in there, with land based planes at both bases, so that won’t be an easy proposition. Yet the loss of Ceylon has made all the convoys around the Cape, and into the Red Sea, a hazardous undertaking. We’ve had to double down on destroyer escorts, because the Japanese have based submarines at Colombo. Thankfully, they withdrew their carrier squadron for operations in the South Pacific, so while the cat is away....”

“Yes,” said Fraser, “but what can we possibly do?”

“We have a lot of troops on Madagascar, and there is certainly plenty of shipping in the region. We still have a presence at Addu and Diego Garcia, as well as Mauritius—seaplane bases, fuel for the navy, and a few fighters at each outpost. Thankfully the Japanese haven’t moved a lot of bombers to Ceylon yet. They could do a good deal more than they have to interdict our sea lanes, but they have their own difficulties to contend with. It isn’t easy to keep their troops and planes on Ceylon supplied. They’ve been sending

weekly convoys from Singapore, but we're on to them now, and our subs have been lingering in the strait of Malacca and off Batavia, now that Krakatoa has settled down. Churchill doesn't think that's enough. The rubber shortages are beginning to be felt at home, and that has forced us to look to South America for new supplies. The oil shipments from the Persian Gulf are also in some jeopardy, and now Churchill wants a plan for a counterattack on Ceylon."

"You mean by sea? An invasion?"

"My," said Tovey. "It seems Churchill doesn't confide all his secrets. This is one he whispered in my ear, as I'm the man who'll have to arrange things. We pulled it off on Madagascar well enough."

"Yes," said Fraser, "but that was against the Vichy French, and without having to worry about the Japanese navy or air force. Somerville is down to *Indomitable*, and little *Hermes*. That's enough deck space for an air raid, but not to cover an amphibious operation."

"Quite so," said Tovey. "So if this plan does get teed up, it will mean Somerville will need more carriers. We only have five fast carriers left. *Eagle* and *Hermes* are too slow for something like this. In fact, I've recalled *Hermes* to join Force H in the Med, along with *Furious*, and the American carriers. That should be sufficient to cover those operations as we make the push towards Tunisia. I need at least one carrier for the Norwegian Sea, and I'm turning that beat over to *Glorious*. Cunningham still has the *Argus* and *Eagle* in the Eastern Med, so we get no help there."

"*Ark Royal*," said Fraser with a glint in his eye. "That's the perfect ship for the Indian Ocean. Why, she can carry over 60 planes, and even more if we utilize the deckpark strategy the Americans use. She's fast, nimble at sea, tough in action with all the AA defense we put on her, and she has a fairly thick skin as well."

"That's what it came down to in my mind as well," said Tovey, "*Ark Royal* and *Victorious*. We don't need them for Force C in the Canary Islands any longer, so they can go to Somerville. They have better endurance and carrying capacity for this Ceylon business. Damn if we don't miss *Illustrious* and *Formidable* now, but I'm told I shouldn't complain."

"Oh? By who, if I might ask?"

"That young Russian Captain, Fedorov. We spoke on that secure encrypted radio of his last week and I mentioned these difficulties. He then

let slip that in the history he knows, we had already lost *five* carriers by this time in the war, not three. He told me our Captain Wells was never supposed to have saved *Glorious* as he did, and was in fact killed in that incident.”

“Really?” said Fraser, feeling just a touch of the macabre in that revelation.

“Yes, and he went on to say that *Ark Royal* was to have been sunk by a German U-Boat, and that the *Eagle* went down in the Med. For that matter, HMS *Invincible* was never built, and I’d wager that *Lion*, or that ship by any other name, was never commissioned in his version of these events—as a battleship *or* a hybrid carrier. He’d probably say the same about this *Vanguard* project you mentioned.”

“Very strange,” said Fraser. “I mean to think that this man can quote us chapter and verse like that, about things that haven’t even happened yet. It gives me the shivers.”

“Yes, but things are different here—the history. We’re writing it all anew. He tells me Ceylon was never taken by the Japanese, and a lot of other things have been turned on their head.”

Fraser nodded. “Has he told you who wins this damn war?”

“Yes, we pull through, though from my perspective, it will be a long hard slog before we get there.”

“That’s at least encouraging.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Tovey. “If all these other things never came to pass in his version of the war, then we might not be able to take his prediction to the bank just yet. In any case, we must never be so complacent as to think we have a sure thing on our hands here. I tell myself that every day, just to keep my mind sharp.” Tovey pointed to his forehead. “We could still lose this war, and must never forget that.”

“Alright then,” said Fraser. “*Victorious* and the old *Ark* go to Somerville, so let’s do the math. I’d say that would bring about 160 planes to the fight between the three carriers. That’s twice what we brought to cover the operation at Madagascar. Is that going to be enough?”

“It will have to do,” said Tovey. “Intelligence says the Japanese may have no more than 36 fighters on Ceylon now, but they could always send more from Rangoon, so we should go heavy with our own fighters. If you can get hold of any of those new American planes, all the better. With good intelligence, we’ll hopefully get in there without Japanese naval opposition. It

seems they have their hands full with the Americans. A remarkable recovery they've made this year! They had six fleet carriers in the Pacific last year, lost four of them, and now, as the new year dawns, they still have five, and two new little hybrids to boot."

"Interesting mathematics," said Fraser. "If only we had that kind of shipbuilding capacity."

"If wishes were horses," said Tovey.

"Will the army bring enough to do the job?"

"16th and 29th Brigades—both for Colombo. That's the place we want. The Japanese will have only their 21st Brigade there, so we'll outnumber them two to one."

"Numbers never seemed to matter before when we were up against the Japanese," said Fraser with a cautionary tone.

"There's still the 21st East African, 27th Rhodesian, and the 7th South African Motorized—three more Brigades at hand on Madagascar if we need them. They could also recall one of the good British brigades from the Burma sector. I'm told that front settled down a bit."

"Seems adequate, and I assume we've got the shipping to lift all these troops?"

"We'll make do," said Tovey.

"Who's to lead the invasion? Surely not the Rock of the East again. Not Montgomery."

"No, he's busy enough in the West these days. This time it goes to Slim, and I think they'll work in Mountbatten. There's another man who'll support these crazy ideas for new aircraft carriers. I'm told he was even in on that plan to build one on an iceberg."

Tovey was referring to a hair brained idea proposed by one Geoffrey Pike, Project Habbakuk. He literally proposed that an iceberg, natural or manmade, could be reinforced with a wood pulp material called Pykrete and even refrigerated to keep it from melting. Hangar space for planes and an air strip could be carved out, and motors attached so the "Bergship" could actually sail about on its own power, with a hull composed of 40 feet of ice on either side that was reinforced and deemed to be torpedo proof. Mountbatten would eventually pitch the project to Churchill, Roosevelt and Admiral King, drawing a pistol and shooting at a normal block of ice, which shattered, and then at one reinforced with Pykrete, which ricocheted off the

block and almost struck Admiral King's leg. None too fond of the British to begin with, the irascible King was not amused. It was later determined that the cost of a full-scale ship would exceed that of many conventional aircraft carriers, and Mountbatten discreetly withdrew from the project.

"Whether we build them on battleship hulls or ice bergs," said Tovey, "I'm beginning to think that the more carriers we can put to sea, the better off we shall be. Since we aren't likely to get our own naval rockets any time soon, planes will have to do, and we need to stop thinking like battleship commanders, and start thinking like aircraft carrier commanders. That's what the Japanese taught Somerville, and I hope we've learned the lesson. I suppose these new carrier projects are a step in the right direction, but frankly, I'll miss the day when it was just good steel, guns, and a little backbone in a battle at sea. When that *Stuka* pilot put his bomb on HMS *Hood*, he went and ruined everything."

"That he did," said Fraser. "And Pearl Harbor showed us just what might happen at Scapa Flow one day if the Germans ever catch us napping. Admiral, I think we'll name this new hybrid carrier *Superb*, just as you've suggested. Then you can take her out yourself—the best of both worlds, guns, steel, and planes alike."

"Indeed," said Tovey, but he still liked his seat on the bridge of HMS *Invincible*, though it felt different now, particularly after that round from the Germans had nearly put an end to him. Thank God Admiral Volsky was there, he thought, his mind resting fondly on the man, and wishing he could sit down with him again and sort all this business out.

He did not know just how soon that would happen, for miles away, gliding beneath the cold arctic ice, a man was sitting on a stealthy submarine with more on his own mind than he could handle.

Chapter 6

Volsky awoke.

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 hit 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 denizen of the deep, 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*?

What had happened to all the days after that, returning to the ship, standing on the weather deck off the bridge and seeing the stain of blood there, Karpov’s blood...? Then Fedorov was at his side again, trusty Fedorov, and together the two of them led the ship and crew into June of 1940, but *Kazan* was nowhere to be found.

There had been battles, the meeting with Tovey in the Faeroes when the Admiral first came aboard *Kirov*, and it was all playing out in a strange new world—a world only made possible by the interventions they had made with

the ship in the past. Where was that other world, the world where this same British Admiral chased me through the North Atlantic, he thought? Where was the world we found when we sailed into the Med, and tangled with the Italians, Germans and British alike? Where was the world that sent that Japanese plane crashing down onto the battle bridge, and saw the ship hounded and pursued by the relentless efficiency of the Imperial Japanese Navy?

That was all gone now, lost, for here they were in a time before any of that had ever happened—June of 1940. The seconds and minutes there would tick off, their sound growing ever louder, through one engagement after another, until that dreadful hour when they approached the time of their first arrival in the past, July of 1941.

But they never reached that time.

Something happened.

It was as twisted as the misshapen warp in the deck, or the sad fate of Lenkov, who found half his body embedded in the galley deck, and the other half inside a Marine locker. It was as mysterious as that thing Fedorov had taken from Orlov, casting it away into Peake's Deep to be forever lost and forgotten by the world.

Then came the grey mist, the endless sea fog that not even the KA-40 could rise high enough to penetrate. Then came the aimless swell of the sea. In time, he knew, they were lost on that sea, for it lapped the shores of infinity itself, and for them, there would be no safe haven where they would ever drop anchor again.

One by one the men went missing... One by one. Orlov was gone, and Tasarov, and Dobrynin. Then Fedorov vanished one day, a loss that some among the crew did not even notice. It was as if he had never even been there, never even existed, but Volsky remembered. He would not forget.

Then it had happened to him. The feeling had been creeping up on him for many days. He remembered when he had called Rodenko to his cabin, to prepare him for what he knew was coming.

"Mister Rodenko," he whispered. "I must tell you that I have felt very odd of late."

"We all have, sir."

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

empty.”

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

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

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

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

Who could comprehend what happened next? There he was, back on the ship, sitting in his chair on the bridge, that dull ache in his sea tooth, the one that would always plague him in the cold waters of the north. There he was, wondering what in hell had happened to the sea, and why the *Orel* failed to return their hails? There he was, his mind emptied of all that he now remembered, innocent, like a child; unknowing.

Everything seemed as it once was—except Fedorov. Something was different about this young navigator, and the way he drew sparks with Karpov was most surprising. Yet what could be more astounding than the things Fedorov began to assert—that the ship was not where they thought it was, that time itself had slipped into their boiling wake, and that they now sailed in the cold uncertain waters of WWII. The impossibility of that was something the mind had to chip away at, with one test after another, until every scrap of evidence they had about the world they were then sailing in served only to vindicate what Fedorov was saying.

I had lost the memory of everything that happened after that first arrival, he thought, but it is all back now, crowding into my weary head like a throng of theater goers jostling for too few seats. We went south that first time, through the Denmark Strait, but not that second time. No. The second time we turned for home, Murmansk, Severomorsk, and who could have believed I would discover that the Captain skulking on my bridge, worrisome, suspicious, conniving with Orlov, ever at odds with Fedorov, would be

replaced by the sinister and devious figure of the man I met in Severomorsk—the *Siberian*.

Two Karpovs! Two ships; two worlds....

Then I went south on the submarine, not *Kazan*, but that antiquated old British boat. Yes... I went south, with that thing in my pocket to deliver to Admiral Tovey, Fedorov's gift—the key. What was that all about? How did Fedorov come by that key, and what did it have to do with any of this madness and mayhem that had swept through their lives, and shaken the fate of the world to its knees?

Then there came that awful moment, in the heat of red battle, the loud boom of the guns, the ear shattering crash on the bridge when that heavy 16-inch shell burst in through the wind screen, and yet did not explode. Men were lying senseless all around him, Tovey one of them, the blood streaming from his ear and neck.

I was stunned and dazed, he thought, but at least had the presence of mind to get Tovey safely back to that aft compartment off the bridge. Then to the wheel, to the ship stricken, headless, careening through the wild sea. Then to the fire of battle, my hand tense on the wheel, legs straining as I threw my weight into it, turning, turning.... Then darkness came upon me, endless silence, the black of unknowing, my very self was torn asunder, lost, lost... *until now*.... Until this very moment when everything I once was, everything I lived out in both those worlds, now comes pouring back into my head again with its animated fury.

"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," said Volsky, 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, memories of yet another life.

He had been sitting at his desk in the Red Banner Northern Fleet headquarters in Severomorsk, when in walked a most remarkable man—Director Kamenski. He sat himself down, a worn book under his arm, and a familiar light in his eyes that Volsky knew he had seen many times before.

"I have a request to make of you," he said. "It has to do with the submarine that only just returned to us—the one we lost in the Norwegian Sea."

"You mean *Kazan*?"

“That is the one. Admiral.... I need to speak with you about that submarine, and a good deal more....”

They talked, and for a very long time, the subject becoming darker and darker, more convoluted, more impossible to believe, like a story that was pulling him deeper and deeper into its web, until he felt himself to be one with it, just another character in the flow, through time, and tide, and long hours at sea.

Those were the things I now remember, he knew. Kamenski asked me to come aboard and put out to sea with Gromyko, and here I am. Yet when I first stepped aboard this boat, nothing of the maelstrom of recollection that is now raging through my mind was even present. I was another self, from yet another life, and one much quieter and sleepier than these other two I now recall. I think I was to stay put in that life—none of this mucking about in time as Kamenski put it to me, but no, it seems I was fated to become a traveler. That is how he explained it. I was meant to be a part of the longest story ever to be written... right here, right now. It continues at this very moment, in the thrum of the engines that I instinctively perceive whenever I go to sea, in the eyes of this man before me now, wondering, concerned, Gromyko.

“Yes,” said Volsky. “I *will* join you. I think I need some air.”

The Admiral 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?”

That was the question, for Kamenski told him that, while they would slip out to sea in the year 2021, *Kazan* would dive into unsounded depths when it reached the Kara Sea.

“You will wake up to all of this soon,” Kamenski had told him. Here, this

will help.” He handed him that weathered book, and Volsky remembered eyeing it with passing curiosity—the *Chronology of the War at Sea, 1939-1945*. And there was something else. He blinked at it stupidly when Kamenski gave it to him, wondering what it was all about.

“Keep that safe for me a little while, will you?” said the Director. “You can just tuck it away in your pocket if you will. Don’t worry about it. These things have a way of minding their own affairs.”

What in the world did Kamenski mean by that?

He had given me that book, and now I know exactly why. Volsky smiled, spying the volume on the night stand beside his cot. And he gave me something else, something I did tuck away in my pocket just as he advised, the key. I didn’t know what it was for when he handed it to me in my office, but by God, I certainly know now.

The memory was there—right there in his weary old head, as if it had always been there, mixed in with everything else. He was speaking with Fedorov about it, the two of them wondering what it was all about...

“This has been a most remarkable journey,” Volsky had said to his young ex-Navigator. “Yet what you say about these keys is very alarming. What are they for, Fedorov?”

“I’ve spent some time piecing it all together, sir. Both Kamenski and I now agree that it all dates back to 1908, the Tunguska Event. That impact did more than level trees in Siberia and provide fodder for the fire of many stories and legends thereafter. It also fractured the fourth dimension, *time*. It seems that several fissures resulted, like cracks in that mirror, as I tried to explain it before. Some were discovered, and because of the obvious danger should anyone move through them to another time, they were well secured and guarded—put under lock and key.”

“By who?” Volsky scratched his head.

“This we do not really know, but we now believe it was done by the same people who made these keys—the same who sent those signals back through time to the ships of the Watch. You remember when Miss Fairchild told us about that?”

“Yes... Then men from the future did all this?”

“I know it sounds fantastic, sir, but considering the fact that we are men from the future meddling about here makes it easier to believe.”

“How did these keys appear here, in the past? You say Director Kamenski has had one for decades?”

“They must have been brought here,” said Fedorov, “possibly by using the very same time rifts they secured. I’m not sure how long the Watch knew about them, or how they came into their possession. Kamenski didn’t say how he came by his key, though he alluded that it was probably obtained by the KGB. Who knows when?”

“The British have keys too?”

“Miss Fairchild certainly has one. She used it to activate one of the rift sites, at Delphi.”

“How many keys are there, Fedorov? Did you learn that?”

“Fairchild says they knew of at least two others. One was in the possession of another member of the Watch, though she did not name that person, and she said nothing about any time rift associated with that key. The second was in the Selene Horse, aboard *Rodney*.”

“What about Ilanskiy?” Volsky asked the obvious question. “Is there a key for that rift?”

“The British knew nothing of that,” said Fedorov. “In fact, I may have been the one to first discover it. Even these men in the future did not know about it, which leads me to think that our mission, the ship, my actions, are deeply implicated in all of this. We’re a wild card in the deck, sir.”

“But you say those stairs took you back to 1908, Fedorov. That means anyone could have used them. It’s a long way between 1908 and the 1940s where you stumbled upon it. We know Sergei Kirov used them, and Volkov. Look what resulted!”

“True, sir. That’s very worrisome. All the other rift zones were well guarded, but not Ilanskiy. I think this is what unhinged the key makers plan—Ilanskiy.”

“What plan do you speak of?”

“I’m not sure, sir, but I’ve been thinking about all this for some time. If men in the future discovered these time rifts and secured them, then they were obviously trying to prevent this Grand Finality Miss Fairchild told us about. But they failed—at least that is what Fairchild believes. She tells me the voices went silent. The watch stopped receiving instructions, and their last message urged them to gather and secure all the keys to the rift zones, and one thing more. It was a warning.”

“About this calamity you mention?”

“In one sense, but it was much more specific. It was about us.”

“About us? You mean the ship?”

“Yes sir. That is why Tovey founded the Watch, to keep vigil for our next possible appearance.”

“Yes, and understandably so,” said Volsky. “But this sounds a little more sinister, Fedorov. You say they were told to secure all these keys, but then they are warned about us? What do these men from the future think we are going to do?”

“I don’t know....” Fedorov had a frustrated look on his face now. “When I first heard about these keys, these other rifts, I thought I could finally set down the burden I have been carrying, thinking all this was on my shoulders.”

“On *our* shoulders, Fedorov, the ship and every man aboard. Do not be so greedy and try to take all the blame yourself.”

“I have tried, sir, but learning about this warning leads me to suspect our part in this tale has not yet run its course. We’re going to *do* something. This is how I see things now. We’re going to do something that could make it impossible to prevent this calamity Fairchild talks about—this Grand Finality.”

“And it has something to do with these keys?”

“Apparently so, sir.... It’s as if the lines of fate are setting course for some distant rendezvous point, a nexus point, and I’m not sure what is supposed to happen there. We are living all this through moment by moment, and groping like blind men.”

“You want certainty, Fedorov, but you know that is impossible. There is no way we could know this—know something we might do in the future.”

“But there is, sir. We’ve seen the results of our actions. We can look ahead in time and know what we have done. These men from the future might also know. To them this would all be history, but they have gone silent. The only thing we have is that last warning. Beware a ship... beware *Kirov*...”

Admiral Volsky frowned. “I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

Volsky smiled grimly to himself, particularly after he now remembered that long conversation he had with Kamenski before he came aboard.

“Captain, our little lightning rod has worked its wonders. Yes? What year

have we gotten ourselves into this time?”

“Why, 1943, sir. 1943.”

Part III

Gung Ho

*“If you build the guts to do something, anything, then you better
save enough to face the consequences.”*

— **Criss Jami**, *Killosophy*

Chapter 7

Patch had no illusions about what was in front of him, but he was confident his division was ready. The unit had come in early in 1942 as part of “Poppy Force” dispatched to Australia. It was thought it might deploy to take New Caledonia, whereupon it would come to be called the Americal Division, but the Japanese reinforcement of that island by the Ichiki Detachment ended that plan. It was not thought the troops were then ready for an amphibious operation against veteran Japanese units. So months of training in Australia followed, before the division was tagged to go to the Fiji Group.

By then the 1st USMC Division had already landed to stop the Japanese advance on Suva. Now Patch led his 23rd “Pacifica” Division in to help stabilize the situation in the south. They landed at Suva and deployed along the Queen’s Road until they ran into the Japanese 38th Division at the Singatoa River delta. There was some hard fighting there by the 164th RCT, but as the whole division had not come up yet, they could not move the Japanese.

It wasn’t until the 1st Marine Division shattered the Sakaguchi Detachment in the north and began a concerted advance on Tavua that the situation in the south became more fluid. The Japanese detached a full regiment, then another, to backstop the defense of Tavua. In the south they held on stubbornly while they were awaiting the arrival of their 48th Division, but had to give up ground, falling back to Momi Bay, a small harbor on the west coast south of Nandi.

As the 48th came in, it immediately deployed south, and so now Patch would be facing this seasoned enemy division as Operation Push prepared to jump off in January of 1943. By this time, the independent 147th RCT that had once been a part of the 37th Division had transferred to Suva, and it was the last formation to arrive, making the 23rd “Square” as its fourth regiment. With this force in hand, and the 754th Medium Tank Battalion, Patch deployed his three organic regiments abreast for the drive on Nandi, holding the 147th in reserve.

In the north, the 25th Division under Collins had relieved the 1st Marines,

but the leathernecks left behind a substantial force in the 2nd Regiment under Colonel David Shoup from their 2nd Division, the 1st and 2nd Light Tank Battalions, and both Marine Raider Battalions under Edson and Carlson.

For the attack on Tavua, Collins would have his 25th Division made Square with the addition of the 145th RCT from 37th Division on Vanua Levu. It mustered at the new airfield at Bua on the western tip of that island, and was then able to take local boats and rafts to make the short crossing to reach Viti Levu Bay in the north. That was to be the main supply center established for Collins, visited regularly by lighters from Suva.

The 27th RCT would lead the attack along the coastal King's Road, moving quickly through the hamlet of Rakiraki until they came upon the imposing rise of "Hill 1000." Overlooking the road, the Japanese had wisely occupied that height, digging in with their 2nd Battalion of the 228th Regiment under Colonel Ito. The 1st Marines had fought hard to try and flank that position, taking the lower portion of the range that ran south from the north coast. That was the only consolation Collins found when he arrived, and he was quick to get his 34th Regiment up on that ground. From there they could push down into the cultivated valley below, driving towards the thin Nasivi River that passed through Tavua to the sea. This was to be the main attack, and the thrust against Hill 1000 further north would be a strong demonstration.

Tavua, with its small fighter field, was the first target for Collins. The other big objective was the coveted Gold Mine at Vatukoula, a town about 10 kilometers south of Tavua. It was there that Colonel Tanaka had placed his 229th Regiment, his lines east of the meandering course of the Nasivi River, and on the high ground called Lakalaka by the locals, Hill 663. His line ended near the village of Nandele, and from there the highlands rose precipitously to a height of 3025 feet.

Collins' 35th Regiment would be coming into the Nasivi River Valley from the south, led by a company of the intrepid Fiji Commandos, and they were after that gold mine. The third Regiment of the Japanese 38th Division was some 20 kilometers to the west at M'ba, the 230th under Colonel Shoji. His troops were working to improve the bridges over the largest watercourse in the north, the M'ba River. The town itself lay on the east bank of that river with the only good crossings in one road and one rail bridge near a big sugar mill. Just south of the town was the main airfield in the north, and the

Japanese had been building a bridge over the river there near the village of Solo.

There was one other force on the island, that of the New Zealand Fiji Brigade Group under Brigadier Wales, which included the tough jungle fighting Fiji Commando Guerillas under Captain Tripp. The Americans had been so impressed by these men that they asked them to stay on when most of the other New Zealand troops were called home. Fearing the Japanese might come one day, they had done extensive work to prepare a defense. The bridges over every river or stream were assessed for the amount of demolitions required to destroy them. Secret HQ sites were hidden in the rugged interior highlands, along with hidden supply caches. All the best mountain tracks were scouted and mapped.

It was this force, with Commando units under Tripp, and Lieutenants Adair and Harper, that would lead the way for Collins' 35th Regiment as it attempted to flank Tavua from the south. The rest of the Fiji Brigade Group was mostly deployed around Suva, and along the coast where the sharp eyed coastwatchers were deployed to warn of Japanese destroyer runs. One battalion was detached and sent north to act as a possible coastal raiding force, and Collins held it in reserve.

That was the board and the playing pieces all set up for the battle. Now it would come down to the troops, and the men who led them. General Patch had a good habit of leading from the front, often establishing a Command Post within 150 yards of the fighting. He came up the road through Bavu heading for Momi, where the regimental HQ of 164th was located under Colonel Earl Sarles. When "Early" saw the General's jeep sweep past his CP, without even stopping, he ordered his XO to gather up all the maps and charts and follow him immediately. Then he went out and jumped in the nearest vehicle to follow Patch up towards the front. A General on the scene had a way of electrifying all the men around him, and Patch wanted to put fire into the opening round as he kicked off his attack on the morning of January 7th.

He had the entire 754th Tank Battalion in the spearhead along the coast, and followed it up with his Combat Engineer Battalion. That morning they punched hard towards Momi, with one company of tanks bypassing the Japanese strong point on the road to the east. It was eventually stopped by a combination of well registered artillery fire and a section of 37mm AT Guns, the tanks falling back towards the infantry.

Fighting stopped at dusk, with both sides exchanging artillery fire, and the Americans tried Momi again the next morning. The defense was equally robust, and when things got tight, the Japanese just got tougher. The line refused to budge, and then a raging counterattack came with fixed bayonets that send two US companies into retreat and forced Patch to commit his last reserve company of M3 Tanks.

Crouching behind the M3s, the US infantry advanced again, this time breaking through a depleted enemy company, its ranks further scattered after that charge. Momi was still holding, but this attack was flanking the town and threatening to cut the road beyond. Sensing opportunity at last, Patch sent orders back for Colonel Tuttle to bring up his 147th RCT, and Operation Push was finally about to build up a good head of steam in the south. The line further east with the 138th and 182nd was still rather static, as neither regiment had been able to make much headway over the first 48 hours of the attack.

On the far right, the 182nd had been trying to find the enemy flank, engaging in a little duel with 3rd Battalion of the 2nd Formosa regiment. It was about to receive an unexpected surprise when the Kamimura Cavalry Recon battalion emerged from seeming thin air on the extreme right and rear of the US line. It had been ordered to try and flank the US position, and moved all night to gain this advantage.

Already in these first hours of fighting, a characteristic pattern was forming around US operations. While they moved and deployed smartly, the infantry had been relying on the vehicles and halftracks of the recon battalion, and those M3 tanks to sustain the advance at Momi. When checked, the Americans would fall back and call for artillery.

By contrast, the Japanese would hold the line tenaciously, and just when it seemed a position was about to be overrun, the defenders threw themselves into a fanatical counterattack, screaming Bonzai as they charged. Sometimes these attacks shocked and pushed back the least experienced US infantry, but when a GI company held its ground, and had its machineguns forward in good supporting positions, they inflicted terrible losses on the already failing Japanese company they were facing. By day's end the Americans had the advantage by sheer weight, then they stopped.

Night fighting was one area where the US troops did not excel, at least not yet. Come dusk the battalions pulled back a little, consolidated their

position, laid out mine sand wire, registered their mortars and positioned machine guns. They had already heard from the Marines that the Japanese were prone to making most of their major attacks at night, and so the US moved into a passive defense, though each battalion would send out patrols. Needless to say, that duty wasn't popular, and none of the grunts wanted to be selected for night patrol sweeps, as they were called. A little rest behind that wire and those machineguns seemed a whole lot more appealing, though sleep was restless, for the enemy was very near.

But this night, the Japanese did not come. The problem they were facing was now an increasing shift in the balance of forces. All this time, he had only been facing two thirds of the Japanese 48th Division. With the threat of a possible amphibious landing very real, General Yuitsu Tsuchihashi could not afford to commit his entire division to the defense, holding back the 47th Regiment at Nandi to guard the port, supply depots, and airstrip. The fact that their battalions were composed of four rifle companies and a weapons company allowed the Japanese to field 30 companies of fighting troops between the two regiments they deployed, and this had been enough to seriously stall the US offensive.

Patch had 36 infantry based companies in his entire division, three more of engineers, three recon platoons and the three tank companies. So his edge was only 47 to 30 in raw numbers of fighting units on the field. Now, however, he was calling up his reserve regiment on the morning of day three. From his perspective, he had his enemy in a firm grip, and now he was going to hit them with everything he had.

One other advantage his troops would possess would be the lavish allotment of artillery in a US infantry division. Each of his four regiments could field five batteries of four guns each, or twenty firing tubes—80 field guns there. Added to these were the self-propelled guns in the cannon company attached to each regiment, eight guns in each of the four companies. So he was going to open the day with a rolling barrage from 112 tubes, and he had the ammunition to keep it hot and keep it coming. Against this the Japanese regiments fielded no more than 60 field pieces.

Unhappy with what he had seen in the first two days of fighting, Patch called together his battalion commanders on the night of the 8th and read them the riot act. They were going to hit the enemy in the morning, and fight all day and all night if they had to, but one way or another, he was pushing

Tojo off the field. That was exactly how he put it, and he wanted no doubts about what he expected the following day.

The thunder of that artillery resounded from the nearby hills and rolled over the still waters of the bay. He gave it to the enemy for a full thirty minutes, and then he had ordered his battalion COs to use their rally whistles and send everyone in in one concerted attack. It was the largest coordinated attack by US forces thus far in the war.

Colonel Imai's 1st Formosa took the worst of that attack on the coastal plain beyond Momi. Tanaka's 2nd Formosa was posted much farther inland, and they were not hit nearly as hard, as all the tanks and recon elements had been restricted to advancing along Queen's Road. So it was one hell of a left hook that hit Imai's regiment, with 1st Company, I Battalion, 164th Regiment leading the attack into Momi, supported by a company of the 754th Tank and one more of engineers.

Patch and his 23rd Pacifica Division took Momi on the morning of January 9th, and he had it before the 147th Regiment had even been able to deploy. So he sent word back that the battalions were to remain in march column, ready to surge through any gaps his men created in the enemy line. He wanted to use that reserve regiment to keep up the momentum of his attack, and try to roll right on through to Nandi, but there was still a lot of fight left in the Japanese battalions. They would simply not fall back, even before clearly superior firepower and numbers in the assaulting forces. Instead they either dug in their heels, fighting to the last few squads, and then simply hurled themselves at their foes in a last desperate charge.

General Yamashita had suffered grievous harm when he had tried to launch a major assault at the Tengah Airfield on Singapore, and now this tenacious Japanese defense was a portent of many bloody battles that remained to be fought in this war. The Americans could not simply drive this enemy off as they might have expected. The Japanese had to be annihilated to take any ground they were determined to hold, and that was a pattern that would repeat itself time and time again in the Pacific War.

Chapter 8

In the center of the board, the high mountainous country that made up most of the island, the drama was much more focused. This time the cast was all fighting Leathernecks, Edson's 1st Raider Battalion, Carlson's 2nd Raiders and the 2nd USMC Regiment.

The two Raider Battalions had been formed in February of 1942 out of an interest, fomented by President Roosevelt himself, for a specialized commando type unit like those the British had been forming. In fact, Roosevelt's own son James would become the Deputy Commander in Carlson's Battalion. The two units were quite different, in spite of their similar designation and overall mission, and this was largely due to the differing temperament of their commanding officers.

Colonel Merrit A. Edson grew up as a farm boy from Vermont, where he spent most of his life outdoors, hunting, fishing, and developing what the Aussies might call good "bush craft." He was athletic, but soft spoken, with a quiet and calm disposition, and as cool as his deep blue eyes under fire. Edson put together his 1st Battalion from a regular Marine Battalion in the 5th Regiment, and so it was structured along traditional Marine lines, with four companies composed of three platoons each, and with eight man squads.

Edson worked well with his men, undertaking any hardship or physical task he asked of them. In the field he might go out on recon operations for days at a time, then suddenly reappear sporting a reddish stubble of a beard and looking like a wild Irishman. That resulted in the first of many nicknames being hung on the man—Red Mike. He was also called 'Eddie the Mole,' A play on his last name, mixed in with the fact that the men said he looked like a mole with his helmet on, his small head lost beneath it, eyes glowing in the dark on patrols. His aggressive spirit also found him being called 'Mad Merrit the Morgue Master,' because if there was a fight at hand, he wanted to be in on the action.

When a second Raider Battalion was to be formed, the Corps asked Edson to send one company to act as its root and stem, but the man who received it, Colonel Evans Carlson, wanted no part of Edson's ready made unit. He rejected most of the men in the company, and forced all the rest to re-apply for admission to his new unit, which he wanted to build from scratch.

Carlson had different ideas about what he wanted for his battalion. He had spent time in China, learning the language and studying the tactics of the Communist Guerilla units, which impressed him greatly. So when he built his battalion, he used much of what he saw there, including the notion that officers had no special privileges. In fact, he never gave or received a salute to emphasize that he was no different from any other man in his unit—though he was just the one giving the orders. What he wanted was cooperation at every level, using the Chinese phrase ‘Gung Ho’ to describe it, which meant ‘work together.’

Carlson then went on to change the entire structure of his unit. He wanted it fast and light, and knew it would deploy from the Navy APDs, old destroyers converted to carry a company of Marines. “You give me six Higgins boats,” he said, “and I can put an entire company ashore, and ready to fight the minute they hit the beach.”

This was due to the fact that he had reorganized his battalion into six light companies, each with two platoons instead of three, and he also added two more men to each squad, increasing from eight to ten. So instead of two four-man fire teams in the traditional Marine Squad, he built three teams of three men each, with one NCO.

Edson and many other Marine officers shrugged at this, and he also did not like or forgive the shoddy reception and treatment his men had been given by Carlson, or the fact that Carlson had the President’s ear, and even had the President’s son as his deputy commander. He would resent his opposite number to his dying day, and the two men often clashed over tactics and methods, even as they did over the organization of their battalions.

Yet no matter how they were organized, the men in those two battalions were a tough group, and ready for a brawl. When they heard that Japanese tactics often led to bayonet charges and close quarters fighting, they took to arming themselves with 9-inch bolo and Bowie knives, and thick socks stuffed with lead balls. Carlson’s men called the blades their ‘Gung Ho’ knives. Since these units wanted speed and stealth, they forsook the larger 81mm mortars and took only the smaller 60mm tubes, and instead of HMGs up to .50 Caliber, they relied on the .30 caliber BAR and the even smaller ‘Tommy guns.’ The one heavy weapon they would lug along was the Boys Anti-Tank Rifle, which they used to good effect on the Makin Island raid, blasting a couple enemy seaplanes that tried to bring in reinforcements. The

troops called it their ‘elephant gun.’

The men were trained by experts, like Colonel Anthony Biddle, who demonstrated his martial arts skills by taking on eight Marines armed with the cold steel of a bayonet, and was able to disarm the entire group single handedly. They learned rubber boat maneuvers, camouflage, anti-sniper drills, patrol methods, and how to make endless jaunts through forbidding terrain, which was exactly what they were doing there on Viti Levu.

* * *

The thing that made the place bearable was the size and scale of the island. Up in those mountains, as difficult as the trek was, you had open sky, fresh air, and could see for miles in any direction. Streams cut through the ravines offering cool fresh water, and there was food to be found, even outside the hidden supply caches secreted away by the Fiji Commandos. Another thing about the island was that there was no malaria here, and that mattered a great deal when it came down to the endurance of the men who would fight there. The temperature was a constant 88 degrees by day, and 74 by night, and there was rain by the buckets in the wet season that began in January, particularly on the north and western segments of the island where all the fighting would take place. It would rain over 20 days per month through April, and the area around Tavua and M’ba would get more than any other place on the island.

So it was raining the day Carlson led his Battalion down the steep winding trail, slowly descending the north face of a ridge. They had started out seven days ago, on the first day of the year, moving by truck from the mouth of the Singatoa River on the southern coast, until they reached the small village of Tuvu. Then it was up through a low 100-meter pass and into those mountains. For the next three days the columns wound their way through a long valley, slowly approaching the higher terrain the towered 600 to 800 meters or more above the trail. There was a long ascent to the hamlet of Bukuya, then they were on a gnarled ridge that pointed north, slowly descending into a three mile wide valley again. It would take them to the upper reaches of the M’ba river at the village of Navala. That was the objective—M’ba, with one of the best airfields on the island, about 15 kilometers east southeast of Tavua where Collins and his 25th Division

would be fighting.

Those airfields were the sole reason any of these men were even here. Without them, the two Japanese divisions on the island might seem dangerous, but they could really do nothing whatsoever to threaten the lines of communications between the US and Australia. But the Zeroes and Claudes and Nate fight bombers on those airfields were the whole of it. The troops were there simply to take and secure those airfields, and deny them to the enemy at the same time.

If the Japanese had thought about what they were doing there, they might have found it better to withdraw from this campaign. Their presence had only served to give the Allies a focus for their counteroffensive. Edson knew as much when he sat down with Carlson to plan this move.

“The fact that they couldn’t take the main island here by storm was the key,” he said. “Once Vandegrift’s Leathernecks stopped the Sakaguchi Detachment last May, the Jap campaign for the Fiji Group was effectively lost.”

“How do you figure?” said Carlson. “Now they’ve put in two full divisions here.”

“True, but we’ve match them, and more. Beyond that, they haven’t set one foot on Vanua Levu, and we already have four new airfields building there. That’s what it’s all about—those airfields. That’s what we’re humping through these mountains for. We get the field at M’ba, and it cuts the Japs down to the one good field they have at Nandi.”

“What about Tavua?”

“They can’t use that any longer. Collins has pushed within range of his 105s and he can shell it all day and night if he wants to. So that makes our mission to get the M’ba field mean even more. If we take that, we’re also cutting off the entire 38th Division at Tavua. There’s only a couple good crossing points over that river. Here, have a look at the map. We need to get these two bridges—the rail bridge south of this sugar mill, and then the main road bridge just north of it.”

“You figure the Japs will be in that mill?”

“I’d make it my CP if I were on the other side. That will probably be one tough nut to crack, but if you move your battalion to the west, you can take it under fire from that side of the river, and then my boys can assault it directly from the east—assuming we can get over there. Hell, we’ll swim over if we

have to, but this map seems to indicate a ford here, and there's another small bridge we can use here."

"Alright," said Carlson. "My men will be in position. You just give the word."

"Good enough, but if things get hot, don't go writing notes to Tojo about surrendering. We fight this thing out to the last man."

"You stow that shit Edson, or I'll ram it down your throat!"

Carlson didn't appreciate the remark. Nimitz had used the Raiders for a quick hit and run against Makin Islands in August, and Carlson had deployed from a couple submarines to hit the island and bust up enemy supplies. They wrecked over 750 barrels of aviation fuel, the radio station, and looted the food stocks. The Japanese garrison had been surprised, but sometime later, twelve seaplanes arrived overhead, along with a few fighters. Carlson figured they were bringing in reinforcements, and decided his men had done their job. He gave the order to withdraw that night, but the surf was so high that the men exhausted themselves trying to get out past the reefs to reach the subs, with several boats swamped, taking a lot of their weapons down with them.

Seventy men were forced to turn back, tired, wet, and with a good amount of their ammo already expended, and very few weapons. They managed to take out a pair of those seaplanes using their elephant gun, the Boys AT rifle, but there were ten more circling overhead, some coming in for a landing. Carlson hit what he later called a 'spiritual low' that night, and gathered his officers about him to discuss their options. They could hold with what they had, try to hide on the far end of the atoll, or surrender.

"That's a bunch of malarkey! I never wrote any such note," said Carlson. "I left it up to the men, and yes, we sent a man out to see if they could find someone to see what we were up against. If they had more than we could handle, surrender was an option, but he had no such orders. He was to come back and leave it to the rest of us as to what we wanted to do."

"You don't cut cards with the enemy," said Edson. "If you lost your rifles, you damn well still had your knives."

"There was more to it than that," said Carlson, irritated to be questioned by a fellow officer like this. "Hell, I had the President's son with me on that island. I had his life to consider."

"Oh, that would have been real swell," said Edson. "The Japanese with

Roosevelt's son, and all because you couldn't manage your rubber boats."

"Look, I'm not discussing this crap with you," Carlson said bitterly. "You just make sure your battalion doesn't get lost when you swing right for that ford." He leveled a finger right at Edson's nose. "My men will be doing the heavy lifting. We go round that west flank alone, and we won't have the 2nd Marines behind us like you will. So when we get in position, you better damn well be ready to hit that airfield and sugar mill."

"Don't worry about that," said Edson, thinking he probably shouldn't have stuck it to Carlson over that flub on Makin. But he said nothing more about it, nor did he apologize.

It was later found that the raid had all but eliminated the entire Japanese garrison on the island, and that those seaplanes had turned back, at least that day. There were only 17 Japanese left on the island, though they would have undoubtedly returned the following day. In effect, Carlson and his men had no one to surrender to. Thankfully, the surf quieted a bit, and they were able to use the remaining boats to fashion a large floating raft and make it out to the subs near the lagoon.

The raid had been a real morale booster back home, and a movie called "Gung Ho" was made about it in 1943, omitting any trouble with the heavy surf, and anything about the officer's parley to discuss possible surrender. Nothing was said about the message Carlson sent out, which actually reached the hands of a Japanese soldier. While returning to his commander, he was cut down by a fire team on the perimeter who didn't know about the plan.

Nor did it say anything about the nine men who were left behind in those last hectic hours, never finding a boat. Amazingly, they managed to evade capture for 30 days on the tiny island until they were eventually caught and sent to the area HQ at Kwajalein Island, where local commander, Vice Admiral Koso Abe, had them beheaded on 16 October, 1942. He would later be hung for that war crime on the island of Guam, five years later.

Instead of closing with these uncomfortable events, the movie, obviously intended as a morale boosting propaganda film, ended with a stirring speech made by Randolph Scott, the actor who played Carlson, who was renamed 'Colonel Thorwald' in the movie. He depicted the event as the first bold counterpunch against Japan, much like the Doolittle Raid. The real consequence, however, was to convince the Japanese that they should strengthen their light garrisons in the Marshalls and Gilberts, a decision that

promised to make any subsequent raids a living hell in those islands, one of which was named Tarawa....

In spite of the mishaps, Nimitz was convinced of the virtue these Raider Battalions offered the Navy, so much so that he wanted to pull them out for the raid into the New Hebrides when 1st Marine Division was relieved. Krueger convinced him that they would be better employed in the highlands on Fiji, because he planned to use the entire Marine contingent left behind, minus the tank battalions, to operate in the mountains to fill the gap between the two Army divisions posted on the North and South coasts. They would not only screen that area from Japanese incursion, but also probe forward aggressively along any mountain track they could take to try and outflank the main defensive position of the enemy. And they could try and take the field at M'ba while they were at it.

Edson and Carlson were just the perfect force to lead the way. Since artillery could not be taken on such a trek, the Marine Defense Battalions deployed near Suva contributed some additional mortars which were rolled into an ad hoc heavy weapons battalion, with one company distributed to each of the three Marine battalions. Carlson's 2nd Raider Battalion led the way, followed closely by Edson's 1st Battalion. Behind them came the entire 2nd Marine Regiment, the real muscle for this attack. They would have no artillery, aside from those 81mm mortars for support fire, but they would bring three more good battalions to the fight.

By the 7th of January, as Patch was slugging it out with the 48th Division for Momi, the Marines were in position. Carlson had swung along the skirts of the wooded high ground west of M'ba, and was very close to a small village labeled Solo on his map. He radioed in that the Japs looked like they had thrown up a small foot bridge there, and it was right near the airfield. He could see Jap planes taking off from his position, no more than four clicks west of the field.

By this time, Edson had scouted the way forward to the river, and Colonel Shoup had all three battalions ready to make his attack to secure any crossing point they could force. II Battalion would hit the ford on the left under Lieutenant Herb Amey. The engineers brought up enough light rafts to get Major John Schoettel's III Battalion over the river in the center, and Major Wood Kyle was on the right, where the Nasiva creek was the only obstacle, which could be forded on foot. From there a good road would lead right to

the airfield, and M'ba beyond, so it was no surprise that 'Woody,' as the men called him, ran into a full Jap battalion when they tried to cross.

The Japanese machineguns started rattling as the Raiders fanned out, their teams deploying to lay down suppressive fire. The action they were now beginning would decide the fate of the 38th Division at Tavua, and the terrible battle there for Hill 1000.

Chapter 9

Lightning Joe Collins had a nightmare of his own on his hands up north along the King's Road. The last ridge blocking the way to Tavua had been partially taken by the 1st Marines before they were relieved, but the Japanese still held Hill 1000, frowning over the road and bristling with Japanese dugouts and MG nests. It had to be taken to permit any meaningful advance beyond that point, and the Regiment tapped for the job was the 27th, the 'Wolfhounds' who had served in the Siberian Intervention and seen the Japanese up close when they occupied Vladivostok. They came marching in to the tune of the 'Wolfhound March,' with tawdry lyrics about the ladies in Manila being ever-readies who wore no teddies.

The ladies they would meet on Hill 1000 were of another sort, though they were ever ready as well. Major General Takeo Ito was a hard man who had fought in China, at Hong Kong, and as part of the invasion of Timor and Ambon. Even at rest, he would sit with his left hand on the haft of his Samurai sword, always ready. The world already knew what some of his troops had done in Hong Kong, and brutality was a hallmark of his command, with many instances where prisoners were summarily executed. So the men on that hill were accustomed to kicking their enemy around, and kicking them hard, and they would not give ground up once they dug into it, not for any reason in the face of the enemy.

It was the arrival of General Sano's 38th Division that had finally brought the 1st Marines to a halt. They had beaten the Sakaguchi Detachment. Now came the Ito Detachment, first to arrive, with all the 228th Regiment and a battalion of the Yokosuka SNLF Naval Marines. Collins had sent in his Wolfhounds twice, thinking to get that hill quickly, and each time they were repulsed, the companies falling back as the Japanese hurled grenades down after them.

The hill itself was perfect for defense, with a series of five ridges extending east toward the enemy like gnarled fingers. Each finger joined the higher ground to create a stony knuckle, with clumps of thick trees on the western slope that allowed the enemy to move up to the hill unseen. At one point a steep cliff looked that way, frowning over the village of Korovou.

From that height, the Japanese could see the approach and deployment of the entire 25th Division, the officers watching the columns moving along the winding coast road, which would then bend around the hill into Korovou before continuing due west to Tavua. They could call in their artillery, positioned further west near Tavua, and raise hell.

The air duel over the island was an ongoing thing, and occasionally one side or another would get a few planes into the action. But for the most part, it would be a contest of artillery, and the iron will of the men on either side. The hill was occupied by the Asano and Kamura Battalions of Ito's 228th Regiment, with III Battalion under Nishimura on the lower ground to their right, in a saddle that linked to the next two fingers of that ridge system.

When the Wolfhounds attacked, they had two choices. They could either scale those fingers and advance along the ridge tops toward the knuckles, or move up the gullies between them instead. Either way, the attackers would be exposed to withering fire, so the Americans relied on the considerable power of their artillery to pound that hill for a full hour before the troops went in.

It wasn't enough.

The Japanese had burrowed into the reverse slope, digging out stony hideouts and riding out the bombardment in self-made caves. Many crouched at the base of that tall cliff, watching the enemy rounds thunder overhead. Then, when the fire finally lifted, the officers would blow their trumpets, and the troops would climb up rope ladders to reach the top again and leap into dugouts and trenches that networked the crest of the hill. They had all their mortars pre-registered on the most likely approaches, and the casualties were heavy when the US tried them that morning.

For two days it went on like that, with the tanks and halftracks unable to get around that hill on the coast road, and the infantry unable to take it. But events further south would be the undoing of Ito's defense. There, the 1st Marines had taken a much higher ridge extending up some 600 meters and overlooking the village of Davota about 7 kilometers south of Korovou. Unable to break Asano and Kamura on Hill 1000, Collins had deployed two of his three regiments in that sector, and now they made a concerted push off that high ground and down into the valley below.

That was where Tanaka's 229th Regiment was holding, and it put up a stalwart defense, until the great weight of both US Regiments was simply too much to hold back. If Ito could have deployed his entire division, evening the

odds, it was very likely that he would have stopped the Tropic Lightning that week. As it was, his 230th Regiment was deployed in reserve at M'ba, and just when he needed it, five battalions of US Marines were staging to attack the airfield.

When it came to the fight at hand, Edson and Carlson quickly put their differences aside. All that mattered now was the mission in front of them, and overcoming the enemy that stood between them and that airfield. Red Mike, the man with the carrot red hair, was leading in 1st Raiders ahead of the 2nd Marines. His men scouted the way, then waved the leathernecks through so they could jog west around the bend in the river and link up with Carlson. The 2nd Raiders had come way around that flank, eventually creeping up on the village of Solo and the small foot bridge there that crossed the river to the airfield.

By now, General Toshinari Shoji's 230th Regiment had been alerted to the presence and approach of the enemy. Two battalions had been dispatched to try and stop the Marines from crossing the river locations scouted out by Edson's Raiders, the third went for Solo, where it immediately got entangled with Carlson's Battalion. There was a widely scattered firefight, with Carlson trying to edge to his left around the enemy defense. Then Edson's men appeared on the trail leading right to the village from the south, and he was raring for a fight.

Two companies of Japanese infantry defended the village, and they had a 70mm Infantry gun emplaced in a sturdy stone building. Edson's men tried suppressing it with their BARs, but it just kept firing. It was then that Mad Merrit the Morgue Master decided he needed some additional firepower, so he turned to his runner, Corporal Walter Burak. He was a tough, fast, running back in college, 190 pounds and all muscle.

"Wally, go find those elephant guns and get 'em here on the double."

An incoming round from that 70mm gun served to put a fine point on the urgency of the order, and Corporal Burak was off in a running crouch, weaving his way through a couple falling mortar rounds instead of opposing linebackers this time. Edson loved the lad, almost like a son to him, and he had personally trained him on map and compass work. But Burak did not need a map to find those Boys AT rifles. He knew Major Nickerson had one in C Company, which was right behind the front, and he soon found the ATG team and led the way back.

They had to come in on their bellies to get up to Edson's position again, as the enemy fire had thickened considerably. Then one man crept forward, positioning the big rifle on its bipod and then bunching up a light pack stuffed with anything soft he could find to shield his right shoulder from the heavy recoil. The gun had a five round cartridge with bullets half an inch thick that could penetrate nearly an inch of steel at 100 yards. He sent all five rounds into the enemy gun position, smashing into the stone wall of that building. Something got through, because that big 70 was quieted just long enough for a rifle team to make a rush and get grenades on it. But then an enemy machinegun opened up, and Edson flinched when he saw two men down with wounds, one looking bad.

Three more Marines made it to that house, their Tommy guns barking as they finished off that gun crew and two soldiers that had come in to support them. But the rest of the Japanese line wasn't budging. The enemy was fighting with a fanatical zeal, and they would simply not retreat. At one point, when the weight of both Raider Battalions seemed like it might swamp one company, up came a reserve company wielding the bayonet and restoring the line. It was part of a strong contingent of the Yokosuka Naval Marines that had come in with the initial landings. They had been in reserve areas, posted at possible landing sites along the coast, but now the Japanese were relieving them with construction troops so they could rush to the fighting. That company stopped Solo from falling that day, and there were two more behind it that had come in by rail.

By now the 8th Marines had pushed so close to M'ba field that their mortars could put fire on the landing strip. They did little more than kick up dirt, for the last of the enemy planes there had already taken off, Zeroes dueling with the Wildcats in the grey skies above. Then those skies opened up with a heavy rain, and the whole scene was lashed with a tropical storm. It being late in the day, the Raiders fell back to regroup, Japanese artillery from the vicinity of M'ba harassing them the whole way.

"Carlson wasn't happy when he met up with Edson."

"Goddamnit Eddie, your battalion was supposed to be here three hours ago!"

"Couldn't be helped," said Edson. "Our lead company got over the river to lead in the Marines, but the Japs hit them pretty hard. I wanted my whole outfit before I swung west, so we waited until the Leathernecks could get

through to my men. Now we're here, so stop your bellyaching. Did to you see how my boys took down that infantry gun? Nicky did a good job with that."

He was referring to Major Lloyd Nickerson and his Boy's AT Rifle team, but Carlson wasn't impressed. "We tried getting around their left, but the line goes all the way to the high ground east of M'ba. The only way we can hit them now is right over this open ground, and that's going to kill a whole lot of good men. So I say we all move up into those highlands, and hit them tonight on that flank."

"Tonight? In this rain? Night moves in unfamiliar terrain are risky. We won't be able to see anything in his mess. I don't like it."

"Don't get your knockers balled up," said Carlson. "My boys scouted it earlier today. 2nd Raiders can lead the way. You tag along behind."

"But if we move that far left we'll lose contact with 2nd Marines."

"So what? We've enough ammo to operate independently for another couple days out here. Now's the time to do it. They know we don't move at night, so we can catch 'em by surprise."

"*They* move at night," said Edson. "Have you considered that? We ought to be hunkered down and ready for them, not caught flat footed like a bunch of suckers. And who said the smoking lamp was lit? You want some hot shot Jap sniper to put that cigarette out for you?"

"Pipe down," said Carlson. "They can hear you a mile away. Why'd you turn into such a dead battery, Edson? Tell me that."

"You out to prove something?" Edson came back at him. "Don't go thinking to make a grandstand play here, cause all you'll do is get good men killed."

It was like that for a while between the two men, but they eventually worked out a compromise, and it was fairly predictable. Carson would try that flank tonight, but Edson's battalion would hunker down and be ready to open up with everything they had if things went wrong.

The rain had abated somewhat when Carlson made his move, just before midnight, but the trees were still heavy with water, the steady drip dappling the undergrowth. With the front blown through a few hours ago, an eerie ground mist started rolling in on the light breeze. As Edson had expected, it was very dark under the remnants of that squall, and too damn quiet. As the men lined up, the clink of a canteen prompted Carlson to look over his shoulder with a frown.

They moved out, the scout who had reconnoitered the way earlier in the lead. The growing mist seemed to tamp down every sound, and all was whisper soft and quiet. The Marines could feel the mud under their boots, and one caught a glimpse of a snake slithering across the trail. When you move like that, in darkness and mist, your ears strain to hear the slightest sound, unseen things in the undergrowth, or lurking above in the rain sodden trees. You strain to hear the silence between those trees, for fear that it might suddenly coalesce, finding tryst with the darkness and shadows, and become a living thing bearing a rifle leveled at your gut.

The way led up, along the slope of the high hill to the west that was called Koronviria, or Hill 1299 on Carlson's map. It was an imposing height, though the slopes were not steep, rising gradually to the west and growing taller with Hill 1763. It was wild country, with no habitation for fifteen kilometers in that direction, and nobody wanted to climb the slippery, muddied flanks of that hill.

They moved out in a long, sinuous line, the sound of runoff from the heavy rain creating little streams on the hillside and masking their quiet movements. Soon the frogs started up a chorus of croaking song in the clammy night. Edson had been right about the Japanese being keen on moving after dark, but not this night. General Toshinari Shoji had seen the Marines make their attack that afternoon, and he had a good idea what he was up against. The enemy had a brigade here, or so he thought, and with half his men on the other side of the M'ba River, he was in no mind to thin out his line here and make a night attack with what might amount to only 20 percent of his regiment. So he was doing what Edson had advised—hunkering down.

It was the last thing many of Carlson's men wanted to be doing that night too, snaking through that low mist, the trees dappling your helmet with heavy drops of water, the leaves licking at your shoulders. The footing was always uncertain, causing a heavy set, well laden Marine to slip and fall with a dull thud and an involuntary curse under his exasperated breath. The whole line stopped whenever that happened, tense and alert, but there was no other sound or sign of the enemy. So they moved on, and ten minutes later Carlson saw the lead scout freeze, one arm extended, catching the subtle downward movement of his hand before the man slowly descended himself into the grey white mist.

The lead fire team went into a low crouch, one man looking to see he was

eye to eye with a big fat ground frog hunched on a low branch. They were mostly dormant at night, and even by day they were sluggish “sit and wait predators,” hoping for insects to happen by.

That Marine didn’t have to worry much about the frog, but this night there were other sit and wait predators crouching in the landscape ahead. Toshinari Shoji wasn’t making a night attack, nor did he plan to move his men, but he had extended his perimeter with patrols, and several had been tasked with laying mines in the undergrowth where the Japanese thought the Americans might advance. One squad was right in the path of Carlson’s advance, with three men digging holes in the mud, two more laying eggs, and the last three sitting in a well concealed position behind a machinegun.

Whether by chance or fate, the gunner in that patrol was Kenji Tokawa, reputed to have the best night eyes in the battalion, and even better ears. He had been listening to the song of the forest, eyes closed, counting the frogs in his mind, hearing the raindrops on the thick green leaves of the trees. Then he felt, more than he heard or saw, that something was very wrong. He could hear the quiet mutter of the men in the mine detail about fifteen yards off. Then he opened his eyes and gazed past the shoulder of one of those men, and saw that Marine Scout forming from the shadows and mist like an apparition, silent, motionless, still as death. The specter had one arm extended, the shoulders and head of the man all that was visible above the heavy ground fog.

The hand moved, ever so quietly, like the flutter of a feather or a leaf falling, or the silent movement of a night moth. The head and shoulders slowly shrank away, disappearing, dissipating into the fog, but Tokawa caught a glint of light, like a firefly, and knew it was the other man’s eye reflecting the pale moon above, which finally emerged from the ragged clouds. He sat there, his finger sliding to find the trigger of his Type 96 LMG, his hand becoming a part of the cold steel weapon, his keen eyes watching that mist for any other sign of movement. His breath nearly stopped, silenced with the tension of that moment, that awful sliver of agonizing suspense before the violence that was surely at hand. He knew he could do nothing for the mine team now, but if he lay very still, and waited....

Part IV

Shattered Gem

“It is better to be a gem that is smashed to atoms than a tile that is whole.”

—Confucian Era Proverb: *The Story of Yuan Jing-An*

Chapter 10

The Devil Dogs of the Sea were out that night, wound up tight, and ready for anything. Carlson's Marines would much rather be curled up in a dry spot under thick trees, but now that they were here, a good old fashioned night raid seemed just the thing to raise their spirits. It was better than watching the rain fill up your dugout, or thinking about the Cat Beer they'd feed you for breakfast back in the barracks. That was Marine slang for milk, Moo Juice, the stuff that came in the armored cows, cases of canned milk set out back in Suva for the lines of hungry men. And you knew things were bad when you found yourself dreaming about those trays full of the sliced ham that didn't pass its physical—SPAM. All those jawbreaker biscuits didn't seem so bad now either, not when you were out in the bush; not on a night like this.

So now the line had become dead still, the mud eaters earning their name as they crouched low. The scout shrunk back, until he found Carlson, who always led from the front.

"Three japs, and they look to be digging in with their army banjos." He meant their shovels, of course.

"Where there's smoke there's fire," said Carlson, looking over his shoulder to find Sergeant Allard. He gave him a silent hand signal indicating he wanted him to deploy his squad to the right. Then he waved Sergeant Cook off to the left. For once he was grateful for the soup they were in, for the fog would mask this deployment.

It did that, but Kenji Tokawa could hear it, smell it, and he knew what was coming next. The two men behind felt him tense up, and then one was stupid enough to rasp out something at the mine layers. Then all hell broke loose. There came a sharp burp of a Tommy Gun, and they saw three men in the mine team go down, the other two instinctively going prone, with one stupidly falling right on a freshly laid mine. The explosion blew the whole team to pieces, and then Tokawa let the lead fly from his Type 96.

Somebody shouted "Grenades!" and three pineapples flew up out of the mist, exploding all around the gun position and raking those last three men with shrapnel. Two went down, but not Tokawa. His hands were glued to his

machine gun, and he fired until the cartridge ran dry, looking frantically around him for a second one when a Marine Sniper finally put a bullet right between those two sharp eyes and ears.

Silence. The cold mist laced with smoke and the smell of battle. Then came shouts from up ahead, and Carlson knew they had found the enemy line.

“Come on!” he shouted. “Get the lead out!”

He was on the radio at once: “Bluebird, this is Red Riding Hood. Come in Bluebird, Over.”

“Roger Red Riding Hood, Bluebird, Bluebird, over.”

“Big Bad Wolf. Repeat. Big Bad Wolf!”

“Roger wilco, Red Riding Hood. Big Bad Wolf.”

That was the signal for Edson’s battalion to open up, and seconds later they could hear the crump and pop of their 60mm Mortars, then the rattle of machineguns and a lot of semi-automatic fire. The sky was suddenly alight with the dull gleam of flares fired up by the enemy, then three bright star shells illuminated the scene. Carlson’s first platoon rushed forward, but Allen’s squad ran right over the mines the enemy had laid, and they put two men down for good. But that didn’t stop those Raiders. Their blood was up and they came charging through the ground fog like a wind of death.

That end of the Japanese line was being held by the Machinegun Company of II Battalion, 230th Regiment. It was going to be hit by three of Carlson’s Companies, which made good use of the uneven terrain as they advanced. The fire teams used their BARs and Tommy Guns to try and suppress the MGs, but the Japanese were putting up a very robust defense. They had taken a position with enough open ground to its front to make for a very difficult approach. In spite of the advantage of surprise, and the darkness, the Marines could not advance under that withering fire.

Then came the artillery.

Seeing his flank as exposed and subject to just this sort of attack, Colonel Shoji had pre-registered a battery of guns on that ground. The rounds fell just short of where the Marines had gone to ground to duel with those MGs, but Carlson could see they were going to walk them back through his men in short order.

Then something happened that no one expected. It was just one of those haphazard moments, men lost and bumbling about in the dark, but it decided

the battle that night. The Japanese III Company, had been in the fight against Edson's Battalion as it advanced on the town of Solo and the foot bridge. It was overrun, a third of its men killed, but in the confusion of that fighting, a sergeant led his men the wrong way and the unit moved south, thinking to find exposed elements of the American forces there to ambush.

They found nothing, wandered about in the dark for some time, and then someone produced a compass to find the way back north. Reduced to just six understrength squads, stumbling through the inky blackness and mist, they came upon the rear of Edson's line again as they were laying down their diversionary fire for Carlson. The snap and pop of gunfire from that direction was most unexpected and the one thing that hit Edson's mind was his remonstrance to Carlson—*the enemy moves at night*.

"Hell!" he swore. "The bastards have worked around behind us somehow. Get on the radio to Carlson. Tell him we've been snookered."

It didn't take a radio call to convince Carlson that his little night foray had been ill advised. His men grounded by that MG and artillery fire, which decided the matter. He produced a pocket whistle, blew hard, and gave the signal to withdraw.

* * *

The night attack had been stopped, but on the other side of the M'ba River, the 2nd Marines had pushed right to the edge of the airfield. It was only the timely arrival of two companies of the Yokosuka SNLF that prevented the field from being overrun. Yet now Colonel Shoji could see that it was useless to leave his men where they were. The planes had all flown off, and the field was under enemy mortar fire. He had a perfectly good strongpoint to the rear at the sugar mill overlooking the rail bridge on the river. The open ground of the airfield could become a killing field from that position. If that were not enough, another night foray, this time done right by the Fiji Commandos, was the final straw.

The Kiwis had been on the southern flank of Collins' division in the north, but left two days earlier, traveling mostly by night, and made their way over the high ridge behind the gold mine at Vatukoula. The defense of that sector had been given to Colonel Tanaka's 229th Regiment, and it was fending off both the 35th Regiment of the Tropic Lightning Division,

reinforced by the arrival of the 145th Regiment of the 37th Division, which had come over from Vanua Levu. For the last three days, Tanaka had worked a full battalion in those mines, carting off as much as he could and sending it back towards M'ba. But he hadn't counted on the night banditry of the Kiwis.

The Commandos found a section of the lightly guarded carts and pack horses, and crept into position. As the lead pack horse rounded a bend, there were three burley commandos, wearing dark bandanas and an evil grin.

"Hello Mates," said one. "This here's a toll road. What's that you've got tucked away there? Looks like it'll make a nice tidy payment."

The Japanese had no idea what they had said, and were gunned down as they frantically tried to get to their shouldered rifles. Then the Kiwis "Commandeered" the gold, led it off the trail, and assigned a small team to deal with it, moving on into the silence and shadow of the mist. Drawn to the sound of fighting to the west, they would arrive on the flank of the battle for M'ba field at just the right moment.

Colonel Shoji heard the sound of their coming as fighting broke out on his extreme left flank. He quickly gave the order to redeploy to the sugar mill. Then he got on the radio and notified General Sato, informing him of the situation. The only two bridges over the M'ba river would soon be under attack, and if they fell, it would mean two thirds of the 38th Division would be cut off east of the river at Tavua. With great reluctance, Sato sent word that Ito and Tanaka should bring their regiments to M'ba at once.

Collins would take Tavua the next day.

* * *

The loss of Tavua and the gold mines were serious enough that Sato now contemplated suicide rather than explain why this had happened to any superior officer up the chain of command. Yet for the moment, the necessities of war stayed his hand. There was no word in the Japanese language for retreat, yet that was what Ito and Tanaka were now doing, no matter how the move was couched as a redeployment to see to the defense of M'ba.

Further south, Sato could also take some solace in the fact that the 48th Division had also redeployed, falling back to the very outskirts of Nandi itself in the face of a determined and relentless attack by Patch and the 23rd

Pacifica Division.

In both these actions the Japanese had suffered from the fact that they had only two regiments forward deployed on the defense. Sato had kept his 230th Regiment in the rear at M'ba, and wisely, for that vital field and the bridges over the river would already be in enemy hands if he had not done so. As for Major General Tsuchihashi in the 48th Division, he had deployed his 1st and 2nd Formosa Regiments on the Momi Line when the attack started, but retained Abe's Regiment at Nandi as a reserve, and to watch for any possible enemy landing from the sea.

This need to keep troops on the coast between Nandi and Latouka was a serious liability, and it meant that the Japanese could never get parity with the attackers, who enjoyed a two to one advantage on both fronts.

Just as the action on the main Fiji island was looking inevitably grim for the Japanese, a long simmering feud between two senior officers was going to weigh heavily the outcome. It had started months ago, involving Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, the brilliant and aggressive planner that had helped lead Yamashita's lightning advance through Malaya. Yet in tandem with those qualities, his temperament included a strong dose of brutality, and many atrocities were committed when Tsuji was near. One such incident was the terrible Sook-Ching Massacre of Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore, and another smaller affair had occurred on the island of Cebu, where it soon came to the attention of the Japanese commander leading the occupation there, General Kiyotake Kawaguchi.

The General had learned that several court justices and other local officials had been summarily executed by The *Kempeitai*, and at the urging and direction of Colonel Tsuji. He vigorously protested, calling the acts nothing more than barbaric revenge killings, and saying they were beneath the lofty heights of Bushido, the warrior's code. Tsuji did not appreciate this opposition from a rank and file General in the Army, and resolved to exact a little more revenge against Kawaguchi.

Having become somewhat influential after his successes in Malaya and elsewhere, Tsuji maneuvered behind the scenes to get Kawaguchi's 35th Brigade transferred to the most dangerous fronts of the war, hoping that he might then regret his remarks, or even be killed in action. It so happened that the battle underway in the Fiji Group was now the center of the hot fire of the

war, and sure enough, Tsuji used his influence to see that Kawaguchi's Brigade was placed into the 17th Army Reserve, and suggested it be sent to relieve the now badly depleted Sakaguchi Brigade on Viti Levu.

Since the 48th Division was already earmarked for deployment to Fiji, Kawaguchi's Detachment would go to Noumea to reinforce the Ichiki Detachment there instead. As such, it became a desirable reserve in theater, close at hand and light enough to be lifted on fast destroyers. Tsuji's revenge would soon see the unit arrive at a critical time in the battle for Viti Levu.

General Kawaguchi did not know he was being set up by Tsuji at all. In fact, he looked forward to any opportunity to get his men into battle, much preferring that to any assignment in a backwaters reserve position on New Caledonia. His brigade had stormed through Borneo, taking Kuching, Pontiak, Tarakan and other vital bases. Then he went to Cebu and Davao in the Philippines where he ran afoul of Colonel Tsuji. Heedless of his enemy's plan, the General gleefully packed away his dress whites in a trunk to wear as he accepted the American surrender on Viti Levu—at least that was how he saw things happening in his own mind when he got the orders to assemble his troops at Noumea Harbor.

There were the cruisers *Haguro* and *Myoko*, with destroyers *Ushio*, *Akebono*, *Ariake*, *Yugure*, *Shigure* and *Shiratsuyu*, all waiting to take his men on a fast ride east through the night. He breathed in the night air, his eyes watching the clouds above as they chased the moon, confident he would soon prevail.

Confidence is one good quality in an officer during war, but when it ripened too much to overconfidence, it became a dangerous thing. That ripening was not so dangerous in a man like Kawaguchi, but it was becoming fatal in the mind of General Imamura, the overall commander directing these movements. He was now sending what amounted to the last strategic reserve the Japanese Army had in the entire South Pacific, and to a place where the merits of such a deployment were questionable, to say the least. Yet Imamura had a reason for being so generous with his thinning troop reserve. It was one he would hold close for a time, and one that would soon change the entire course of the war, or so he believed.

The only thing that mattered on Viti Levu were those airfields—not the town of Tavua, or the little harbor at Nandi Bay, nor even the gold mine. When the order to send Kawaguchi came in, the fields at Tavua and M'ba

had already been rendered useless. Now there was only the main field at Nandi, about ten Kilometers north of the new front line in the south. If Patch could gain just a few more kilometers, he would have that field under his guns, and the whole reason for all these deployments would be rendered null and void.

Yet all Imamura could see was the hope that, with this new reinforcement, the situation might still be reversed. For his part, Kawaguchi had every reason to feel he would soon wear those dress whites. His honor demanded no less. The “Brigade” he commanded was really no more than a reinforced regiment, the 122nd under Colonel Oka, augmented by the Kuma Battalion from the 4th Infantry Division. It was still a strong force, and would soon become a most welcome reinforcement for the defenders on Viti Levu.

In another retelling of these events. Kawaguchi had been fated to tangle with the US Marines, and by a twist in fate’s contorted rope, that was exactly what was going to happen here again.

Chapter 11

Sugar had been a cash crop in the Fiji Islands for generations, ever since the British brought indentured laborers from India to work the plantations and sugar cane fields. On the main island of Viti Levu, there were now large crushing mills at RakiRaki in the north, at Suva, and the big mill at M'ba on the river. Small mills, up to 34 at one time, dotted the island as the center of many plantations. The Rarawai mill at M'ba had been established in 1886 by the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company. Over the years it had grown considerably, a complex of many buildings, some stone, others tin sided with wood beam frames. The place was sited right on the east bank of the river, just south of the town, and right between the major road bridge a kilometer north, and the rail bridge 500 meters to the south. It was therefore a strategic position of great importance, and Colonel Shoji saw that immediately.

The threat the Marines now posed to M'ba produced a violent histamine reaction through the Japanese defense structure. There had been several battalions of the Yokosuka SNLF guarding the landing sites, and they were all relieved by construction troops and rushed to the town. Now, the addition of Kawaguchi's forces and the retreat of the Ito and Tanaka Regiments would produce a massing of ground power near that vital town. Edson, Carlson and the 2nd Marines were going to have a good deal of very unhappy company soon. Their long mountain trek and end around maneuver was soon going to become the main front of action in that segment of the island, and that Sugar Mill was going to stand like a factory of Volgograd, the scene of an intense battle yet to come.

The situation facing the Marines went from the jubilation of a surprise attack, the daring of that night raid, to the growing concern that they were now up against much more than they bargained for. The arrival of Kawaguchi's troops was a turning point. The advance on M'ba by the 2nd Marine Regiment was halted, and seeing greater numbers of enemy troops arriving on the scene, they wisely fell back to the southern edge of that field. Kawaguchi quickly occupied the Sugar Mill on the river and set up his headquarters there. He then deployed his men forward, reoccupying M'ba

field in the wake of the US withdrawal.

Even though his 228th and 229th Regiments were withdrawing west and south from the Tavua area, General Tadayoshi Sano now turned his attention to the threat posed by the Marine Raiders on his south flank, west of the M'ba river that bisected his position. He could not allow that flank to be turned, which would cut off the bulk of his forces still east of the river. It would begin on that far left flank, where the Yokosuka SNLF battalions had been combined into a special brigade under the overall direction of Admiral Gunichi Mikawa. Whenever the *Kido Butai* withdrew to fleet ports to replenish or regroup, it was Mikawa's responsibility to organize the naval support runs out to Fiji.

The Admiral had already been chastened by Combined Fleet Chief of Staff Ugaki when several cruisers were damaged in an attempted bombardment of Suva earlier. Now he had the difficult job of holding up the Navy's honor in the land battle as well. He looked for a suitable officer with ground combat experience, and selected Commander Minoru Yano to take the Combined Yokosuka Brigade under his wing.

Now these troops were massed west of the M'ba river, their lines extending as additional companies arrived from their former guard assignments on the coast. Yano wasted no time organizing a major attack on the morning of January 14th. His intention was to either destroy or drive off the two Marine Raider Battalions west of the river, and secure that flank.

Carlson had thought his left flank was well protected by the imposing rise of a thickly wooded hill dubbed Koronviria, but the Japanese Marines would prove him wrong. All that day, they had scaled the far side of the hill, getting into position after dark and resting. Now they were ordered to make a night attack, with 4th Yokosuka on the extreme flank charged with swinging widely around the presumed enemy line to outflank it, while 3rd Battalion made a direct attack on the forward companies of Carson's line that had just put an end to Kenji Tokawa behind that machinegun.

The enemy moved like shadows through the sodden underduff of the forest, coming upon the lines of 3rd and 4th Companies like phantoms. Gunfire erupted all along the line, but Carlson's men had been thinking they were turning the enemy flank, and were now surprised at the strength of the attack on their left. The Japanese Marines swept down the eastern flanks of that hill like a dark wind, and as rifle fire erupted well behind his left

shoulder, Carlson realized what was happening.

“Christ almighty,” he said to his radio man. “The bastards worked their way around our left. Get on the radio and see if Edson can throw some mortar fire onto that hill!”

He could hear the battle intensifying, then saw his men rushing back from their forward positions in groups of three and five. It was clear that the enemy had pushed them to retreat, and his jaw tightened. Carlson blew his whistle, shouting at the men to come his way.

Up ahead, he saw something he would never forget, big Ed Thompson, all of six foot four and muscle top to bottom. He had exhausted his ammo, and was standing at the edge of his slit trench swinging his rifle like a club as a wave of Japanese infantry swept over the line. Carlson saw the big man bat down three enemy soldiers, then a fourth stuck him with a bayonet in the gut. Thompson doubled over, then lunged at his assailant, taking the enemy by the throat and literally lifting him off the ground. He would choke that man to death before three more Japanese Marines stormed up, one putting a bullet into Thomson, the other two using their bayonets. But that big Marine had killed three enemy soldiers as they charged, and four more before they took Thompson down.

Somehow, seeing that man fight and fall like that steeled Carlson.

“Form up here to my front!” he yelled, and the Marines rushed into the tree line where he had set up his battalion CP, lying prone on the wet ground. Then a lot of gunfire erupted off to the right, and Carlson knew that the enemy was hitting Edson’s battalion as well.

Commander Yano had much more force than the Marines realized, enough to overwhelm that left flank and send Carlson’s men back in some disarray. At the village of Solo, there was now a bitter fight underway to control that foot bridge that crossed the river at the edge of M’ba field. Then, on the far side of the river, artillery fire began to come in on the positions of Colonel David Shoup’s 2nd Marine Regiment, heralding yet another attack.

The Kawaguchi Detachment had arrived in force, and now it charged across that airfield, weathering the MG fire from the Marines as the men howled. They were known as a shock regiment, the troops trained to make this all-out attack, bayonets fixed and wailing like banshees as they came. The Marine lines were not fully prepared to meet them, the men only able to dig out shallow depressions in the field, with no wire, no mines, and no

artillery behind them. Even the few mortar teams they had were still struggling over the river and trying to get set up when the night charge came.

Shoup's men were shocked indeed. One minute they had been making what they thought was a perfect flank attack on the enemy, the next they seemed to be tangling with an entirely new force, at regimental strength, that seemed to coalesce out of the mist itself and take on the terrible shape of this ferocious bayonet charge. Many of the companies were already low on ammo, but they held their ground, firing until they ran dry and then going hand to hand as the enemy reached their slit trenches at the far end of the field.

Now the bolo knives were out, slashing like cruel machetes at the oncoming enemy. The Marines had more muscle and brawn than their enemy, and where it did come to close hand to hand combat, they generally held the line. The mortars of 1st Heavy Weapons Company finally got set up and put their four-duce mortars into action, which helped to slow the enemy attack.

Major Ruud's III Battalion took the full brunt of the enemy attack, which penetrated all the way to his CP, the men of his HQ fitfully firing their Tommy Guns as the enemy charged. Major Crowe's II Battalion on his left was also hit hard and pushed back. Only Hays stood firm with I Battalion, but he was posted on the far right, beyond the low rise of Navoli Hill that overlooked the field to the east, and Kawaguchi had not attacked in that sector.

The night charge had been perfectly timed with the attack by Yano's SNLF troops. Unlike the disastrous charge made by 5th Division in the battle for Singapore, this attack was entirely successful, driving the enemy from the edge of the airfield.

Just across the river to the west. The 5th Yokosuka SNLF had finally pushed Edson's men out of Solo, commanding that foot bridge, which the Marines blew up with a bundle of three grenades before they yielded the ground. It was now clear that the enemy had much more strength than anyone anticipated. It was no longer a question of attacking M'ba to try and turn this flank.

Now Colonel Hall knew he had no recourse but to fall back and try to rally his men near the ford they had crossed that day when they first advanced on the airfield. While that facility was empty of enemy planes, and

useless as the offensive threat it represented for the Japanese, it was a point of honor. General Sano would not have it reported that he had lost both Tavua and M'ba in the same week. He had decided his division would now fight here, and to the last man.

Back on the low hill that overlooked Solo, Edson saw that his own position was equally compromised when Carlson's end around had been checked and then flanked by the surprising strength of the SNLF counterattack. He gave the order to withdraw, getting Carlson on the radio to tell him he needed to get his men back fast.

"We can't hold," he said. "Fall back on my CP."

One by one, the rifle companies pulled out, some firing the last of their ammo to cover that withdrawal. Carson reached Edson's position an hour later.

"2nd Marine is in trouble," said Edson. "They got hit with a tsunami east of the river. "The Japs came right across the airfield and damn near overran two of his battalions. The Kiwis are up on Nasiva Creek, so he's pulled his men out there to shore up the line near the airfield. This attack is over. They've got the ball and we're on defense now until Collins can get down here from Tavua with the 25th. His lead elements are only six or seven clicks away, or so he tells me. They plan on making a big push tomorrow morning."

"Nice of them to help out," said Carlson with an edge to his tone. "Will they be doing that before or after breakfast?"

"It'll take them time," said Edson. "Look at the map. They'll have to clear that big peninsula west of Tavua Bay. Japs could have anything up there towards Yanutha Point. In the meantime, he tells me he can get two regiments in position to make a push on M'ba tomorrow, but that won't likely get underway until afternoon. They'll have to get sorted out after moving up tonight, get their artillery set up, and you know they won't do that until daylight when they can scour out the enemy positions. Hell, they might not attack at all tomorrow, so we've got to consider what to do here."

"You ain't thinking of surrendering now, are you?"

Edson knew that Carlson was just jabbing him for the grief he had given him earlier about the Makin Island raid. But when he thought about it, the situation they were facing now was equally dire. They could only carry so much ammo with them, and this whole operation was supposed to have been a diversionary attack to make the enemy think they had been flanked. Collins

was late because half of Sano's 128th Regiment had simply refused to yield their position on hill 1000 overlooking Tavua.

It had taken four days hard fighting to take that hill, and the enemy there had fought to the last man. It had seemed that even their dead would fight on, for wounded Japanese soldiers would lie still for an hour, surrounded by their fallen comrades, then suddenly seem to come alive again to fire at any unsuspecting soldier unlucky enough to wander by. That set Collins men to work going over the dead with their bayonets. None were left alive.

Now Collins had his 34th Regiment on the main road moving west from Tavua. To their left the 145th Regiment of 37th Division was on the line, and the southern flank of his advance was his 35th Regiment. His 27th Regiment was worn out after taking Hill 1000, and he was resting those men at Tavua, thinking he would use those troops to clear the peninsula west of the bay that Edson had mentioned to Carlson.

There were two other tracks that led from the Tavua Valley over a series of intervening hills to the M'ba River sector. One led from the Gold Mine at Vatukoula to Nasiva Creek, where the Kiwi Commandos were holding on the extreme flank of 2nd Marine Regiment. By dawn the first companies of the 35th Regiment were wending their way down that highland trail into the lower cultivated plain that led down to M'ba, but they were tired and needing rest. Edson was correct in his assessment that Collins would not attack at all that next day, and the Marines were still on their own.

As for General Sano, he had seen most of his 128th Regiment destroyed in the battle to hold Hill 1000 and Tavua. Yet that had enabled him to get his 129th Regiment back to M'ba, and they were now assembling in the heavy cultivated plantations just east of the river. His situation was precarious now. All the objectives the enemy wanted were east of the river, the airfield and the town itself. The river was a thousand feet wide with the recent rains, fairly deep, and there were just two bridges under his control.

He considered what to do. If he fought to defend the settlement and airfield, his men might be forced to swim over that river if things went against them. The terrain here was not nearly as good as the positions he had held east of Tavua, yet the enemy had pushed them all the way here. The 129th was worn out, and he knew the best thing would be to get them over that river, which would present a formidable obstacle to any further enemy advance. He had already given orders to move all artillery and heavy

weapons west of the river, but the battle for that airfield had seemed the heart of his charge here.

He went to the Sugar Mill, looking to find Colonel Kawaguchi. "Your men have fought well," he said, "but I must now ask you to redeploy west of the river."

"What? And give the enemy back this airfield? We just took it from their Marines, and at considerable cost."

"True, but in reality, the field is useless. It means nothing now. Tomorrow it will be under the enemy guns from the east, and in any case, we have no planes there. The river presents us with a much better defense. We must move west, and then I think this enemy attack must fail for good."

"This is shameful," said Kawaguchi. "You speak of defense? We should attack, as my regiment did, and annihilate the enemy."

"That would not be wise," said Sano. "I assure you, there is no dishonor in this," he admonished. "Look here," he opened his field map. "The SNLF have pushed the enemy away from this foot bridge. I want your men to cross there, hold it, and defend the west bank of the river as far north as this position. The main rail bridge and this sugar mill must then be held at all cost."

"Then they will have the airfield."

"That means nothing. We will have it under our guns as well, and not a single enemy plane will ever land there."

Kawaguchi would do as Sano requested, though he was very disgruntled about it. His men had fought hard, made a brave charge and prevailed. Now, to simply hand the enemy back the airfield they had overrun, seemed a terrible waste of both blood and honor.

For his part, Sano would now order his 129th, and anything left of the 128th, over the main road bridge at M'ba. If anyone questioned him about the loss of the airfield, he would blame it on Kawaguchi, and deny he ever gave him orders to withdraw. Honor and face had many guardians, and deception and duplicity would serve as well as bravery and resolution.

Chapter 12

When Collins and his 25th Tropic Lightning finally did advance, they would find the plantations and fields east of M'ba undefended, the ground eerily quiet and still as the men cautiously probed forward, their eyes on every tree to look out for enemy snipers. He would take the town without a fight, and the airfield with no further casualties. Then he sat in his CP looking at the map and noting the twisting course of that river. He had hoped that the Marines might have compelled the Japanese to give up that river line and withdraw towards Latouka, but it hadn't happened that way.

These bastards are going to hold on that river, he thought. And it's going to be hell getting them to move. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Now I'll have to swing the entire 35th Regiment down to link up with the Marines. There's just no way in hell we'll get over that river if the Japs fight like they did at Hill 1000.... No way in hell.

To prosecute this attack further, he knew he was going to have to enfilade the enemy positions. The river ran north all the way to the coast, wider and more swollen with rain as it went. The water was muddy brown now with all the runoff from yesterday's storm, and a muggy heat settled over the whole scene. Collins looked over the daily report from Patch and his Pacifica Division, seeing that he had pushed all the way to Nandi, but that the enemy had dug in his heels there too.

"Now how do we get around this enemy defense," he said to the Regimental COs. "We can't flank 'em on our right. There's nothing but miles of mangrove swamp up there and the river is at its widest. The Marines are on the left, and they damn near got overrun last night. They need ammo, and both the Raider Battalions got roughed up pretty bad. Since they still hold that ground, that's the only thing to do. This high ground here, Mount Koronvira, was where Carlson and Edson were last night. The Japs pushed them all the way back to these streams feeding into the river bend."

The 35th Regiment under Col. Robert McClure was closest to the Marines that day. "What about here," he pointed to the map. "That looks like a saddle of passable terrain between Koronvira and this other high ground," he said.

That other high ground was the rugged range leading up to Mount Evans, over 3800 feet high. It shielded Vitongo Bay and the port of Latouka from any advance from the east, but that saddle of lower ground between the two mountainous areas looked like it could be used.

“Carlson says their SNLF troops are posted there. Those are some of the best men they have.”

“Which is why they’re holding that ground,” said McClure. “Why don’t I take the 35th down there and relieve those Marines?”

“That’s just what I was about to order,” said Collins. “Look, the recon elements and engineers can screen off M’ba. I don’t think the Japs will be crossing that river again. So I want to move everything we have along the line of the Nasiva Creek and get into a position to push through that saddle.”

“What about the Marines?”

“They had a long hike over the interior high country to get where they are now. I’ll rest them behind the river for a few days.”

At that moment, Lieutenant Colonel Dixon Goen of the 2nd Marine Regiment tramped in, a scowl on his face. He was the Regimental XO, as Shoup was down with a shrapnel wound. “You army boys have enough to eat this morning?” he said gruffly. “Cause my men haven’t eaten for two days.”

“Easy does it,” said Collins. “We were just looking over our options on your flank.”

“Options? There’s only one play you can run, and that’s right through the ground we’re holding now. But we won’t have it long if we don’t get some goddamned food and ammo.”

“Look Dix, it’s coming,” said Collins. “McClure is moving your way right now. His 35th Regiment will relieve you. When he does, I want you to look over the map for any possible landing site we could hit from the sea. There’s a boat launch on Tavua Bay, and a small pier up here on this peninsula. We could use those to get some good men seaward and hit ‘em where they ain’t.”

“You want my men to mount up for an amphibious operation now?”

“Isn’t that what you Sea Dogs do for a living?”

“Sure, when we’re not busy humping the high country and taking on the whole goddamn Japanese Army.”

“Colonel, you have a wonderful gift for exaggeration. I burned out the 27th Regiment trying to take one stinking hill at Tavua. Now, we’ve pushed

the Japs your way, and yes, they bunched up and double teamed you, but your mission paid good dividends. They gave up M'ba last night."

"We saw them pullout," said Goen. "Alright, I'm tired, and blowing off some steam. I know you had it as tough as we did, but there was no arty behind us, and no supply trucks. We were supposed to make a diversionary attack, and had three days' ammo with us. It's been five days of hard fighting now, and we're damn near empty. General, if you want my men for an end around, we'll be happy to oblige. But we'll need some chow and sleep before we hit the boats."

"You'll get it. You've done all we asked of you down there, and a damn good job."

"What about Carlson and Edson? They're still hanging on the flank."

"I've got the Kiwis to send down and replace them, so pull them back as well. We'll find APDs somewhere to move them. Hell, Carlson used a submarine at Makin."

"Seems to me you think you're going to be looking at a logjam if you try to turn the flank of that river defense."

"Dix, you could be right on that again, and that's where you and your boys get to shine. Terror from the sea." Collins stuck a big fat cigar in his mouth and smiled.

* * *

General Harukichi Hyakutake seated himself at 17th Army Headquarters, Rabaul, his eyes lost in troubled thought behind the round wire framed eyeglasses he wore. An older man of 55 years, Hyakutake was from a distinguished military family. Both of his older brothers were wizened Admirals in the Imperial Japanese Navy, but his path had taken him to the Army, where he graduated from the Army Academy in 1909. Strangely, one of his classmates was the now famous Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, a man he would one day oppose in combat while serving in the Kwantung Army in Manchuko.

An expert in Cryptanalysis, he was prominently involved in the Army Signals School, and now he stared at the coded message he had received, summoning him to this secret meeting with his commanding officer, General Hitoshi Imamura. The words inscribed on the message were plain enough in meaning: Shattered Gem, yet the final character indicated the phrase was a

question, and not a definitive statement. Now Hyakutake sat before Imamura, the two men meeting to discuss the course of the ill-fated Operation FS.

“Well?” said Imamura, with just the hint of accusation in his voice, and an equal measure of impatience. “What of the planned counteroffensive against the Americans on Viti Levu?”

Hyakutake, hesitated briefly, a subtlety that indicated his displeasure, with a shade of regret. “It has been less than satisfactory,” he said, with understatement being the preferred manner one would use to disclose a setback or failure of any kind. “Tavua is now in enemy hands, and Sano had to redeploy west of the M’ba River. Yet he now believes he can hold that line against any further enemy advance.

“Interesting that such a redeployment would be part of a planned offensive,” said Imamura. “What of Nandi?”

“General Tsuchihashi still controls the town, harbor, and airfield there.”

“But he has not advanced on Suva as planned?”

“At the moment, that appears to be impossible. The enemy has been reinforced.”

Imamura offered a thin smile. “Very well, General, you and I can drop this pretense that there will ever be a satisfactory offensive that reaches the enemy base at Suva, and delivers that island to our control. And yet, we have committed so many troops to this operation that we now find ourselves in a most unsatisfactory position throughout this entire theater. It was necessary to recall the 20th Reserve Division from Korea, simply to provide troops for garrison duty on the other islands we now control. My question is this, and it was one that was recently put to me by the Navy, by Admiral Yamamoto himself, in fact. Are we overextended? Is it wise for us to continue to utilize our best divisions in the Fiji Group?”

After a brief moment’s deliberation, Hyakutake made a most unexpected admission. Imamura had thought he would continue to put on the brave face, for honor’s sake, and recommend an intransigent defense on Fiji, to the last man if need be. Honor might demand this, but wisdom would flee from such a decision. The General cleared his throat and spoke, with uncharacteristic frankness.

“It is interesting that I should be summoned here with the two words inscribed on this message,” he began. “And I do not fail to notice the interrogative applied to this code. If I am being asked to decide whether or

not to spend the forces I now command in a foolish and desperate attack, or even a protracted defense of Fiji, my answer is no. That operation is already a gem that has been shattered, but in this case, I believe it would be better that this tile remains whole.”

“Then you see no prospect for victory there?”

“I do not—at least not with the forces I presently command.”

“Yet you were just reinforced with an additional regiment. What did Kawaguchi do there after he landed, go fishing?”

“Kawaguchi’s regiment was instrumental in stabilizing the situation on the M’ba River line. Sano’s 128th Regiment was shattered defending Tavua, so now Kawaguchi’s troops merely restore the 38th Division to about 80% of normal strength. That said, we have not had any further delivery of supplies and ammunition, and I foresee that this will become a serious problem if the Navy does not address it immediately. Keeping two divisions supplied on Fiji requires an enormous logistical effort. All our birds are in one cage, and so the foxes find it easy to gather around us. If they prevail, what then?”

“This is my question exactly,” said Imamura. “Considering that we have already had to strip Borneo, Sumatra and Java bare just to provide the troops you presently command, I begin to see that we are now very vulnerable to enemy counterattack. They have removed the Marine Divisions that were first landed on Fiji, am I correct?”

“All but one brigade sized force, which we have matched with the Combined Yokosuka SNLF troops.”

Then where have those other Marine regiments gone? We believe they were sent to Pago Pago for rest and refit, but you and I both know they will not stay there long. In my opinion, we must expect that the enemy will attempt further offensive operations in the near future. They are building up strength faster than we are. Intelligence indicates they still have the equivalent of two Marine divisions at Pago Pago, and two more Army divisions in Brisbane, along with another two good Australian divisions that were withdrawn from the Middle East. If we cannot prevail now, with two of our best divisions on Fiji, what will happen when they choose to commit these additional forces against us?

“Shattered Gem,” said Hyakutake. “We will see the forces we have already committed to Fiji destroyed. Sooner or later, this will be the inevitable result. The only way it could be avoided would be for the Army to

make a serious commitment to the Strike South force allotment. Yet, considering the burden imposed on us by the enormous commitment of troops and resources in China, our prospects here seem dim.”

“I must agree with you, General Hyakutake. To look at the map now would make it seem that we have won an undeniable victory in this drive south. We have the Philippines, all the Dutch East Indies, control of the entire Solomon Island sector, the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, and have come as far as Fiji. We even control Ceylon, but to do all this, the troops the Army has provided us have been spread very thin. We hold all the former Dutch colonies with but a single division, the 18th. Nishimura has sent all that remained of the 5th Division to Ceylon, retaining only his Imperial Guards Division at Singapore. The loss of the 2nd Sendai Division on Java when that volcano erupted was a major setback, and even though it is reforming in Japan, this business on Karafuto and the new Siberian front that opened near lake Baikal is most alarming.”

“Which leaves us too few divisions to even hold what we now have in hand,” said Hyakutake. “This is why leaving the bulk of our forces on Fiji is ill-advised.”

“So we are in agreement,” said Imamura. “Yet you know what will be said if I should raise this matter with Imperial General Headquarters. They will say that we have already been given the 20th Division—what more is needed? Yet that division must now be used to strengthen our position in the New Hebrides, and we must do so soon, before the enemy chooses to attack us there. Such a move on the part of the enemy would serve to saw off the long tree limb that your forces now sit upon in the Fiji Islands. We cannot permit that to happen.”

“Then there will be no other reinforcements for this theater?”

“None that I can foresee.... Unless...” Imamura leaned back, taking a deep breath. “Unless we can convince the Army that the prize we have taken in striking south outweighs any benefit that we could possibly obtain by trying to continue this futile campaign in China.”

Imamura knew that he could easily be branded a defeatist with such words, even relieved of command and sent to some forsaken position in outer Mongolia, yet he now perceived that he had found a confederate in Hyakutake, and wanted to secure his support. Now he was going to reveal something that few knew in the Army chain of command. Rumors had

traveled in circles through Imperial General Headquarters, but they were nothing more than that—until now.

“General, I have learned that a proposal has been drawn up for a possible accord between our forces in China and the Kuomintang under Chaing Kai-shek. As you know, his forces were locked in an emerging civil war with Mao and his Communist front. It was only our arrival that forced the two sides into an alliance to oppose us, yet Chiang has put out peace initiatives on more than one occasion. We never saw such an accommodation to be advantageous before, but now things have changed.”

“How so?” Hyakutake was very curious about this.

“Fiji has changed things here, Ceylon in the Indian Ocean, Burma, and now both Karafuto and the new front at Lake Baikal. The fact that you and I meet here and reach the conclusion we have come to has not been lost in the minds of highly placed generals at Imperial General Headquarters. General Sugiyama wanted all this—his war in China, here in the South Pacific, and against the United States. Now he begins to see that his arms are too full. The Army cannot carry all that it has grasped, not while so many of our troops remain in China. So Now Sujiyama has come to a new appraisal of the situation.”

“That is most unusual news,” said Hyakutake, as the Army Chief of Staff, Sugiyama had been an unflagging advocate of all these campaigns. “I never thought I would hear this.”

“Nor I,” said Imamura, “but someone has been whispering in Sugiyama’s ear.”

At this Hyakutake simply raised his eyebrows, waiting.

“Ivan Volkov,” said Imamura. “Did you know that man was recently granted a personal audience with the Emperor? Yes, I have that on good authority, and when he emerged from that meeting, he went directly to Imperial General Headquarters with a proposal—no, not a proposal—with an Imperial order!”

“What order?” Hyakutake leaned forward, his breath stilled as he waited.

Part V

Grim Reckoning

“There's a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be reckoning yet ... it may be sooner or it may be later, but it's a coming...”

— Solomon Northup

Chapter 13

Halsey was back, standing on the weather deck off the bridge of the *Essex* as he watched the battleships arrive from the south. He stood tall and proud, full recovered from his illness, just as the fleet he now commanded had made a remarkable recovery. There beside him were the *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, risen from the dead in the shape and form of two more *Essex* class flattops. The cruisers and destroyers were farther out, but the Admiral wanted the battleships in nice and tight. He had been on the short range radio a moment earlier.

“Looks a little busy out here,” came Fletcher. “Where’s the valet parking?”

“Pull ‘em right in close,” said Halsey. “You can park one right next to each of the three carriers.”

There were *North Carolina*, *South Dakota* and *Washington*, three fast battleships, and the only heavy ships in the fleet that could run with the carriers. They were beautiful ships, their architecture foreshadowing the long sleek lines of the *Iowa* Class that was now under construction. Fletcher had been operating them independently in the Fiji Group, occasionally pounding Tavua field in the north. Now Halsey wanted them near. They were fast at 28 knots, they had excellent endurance, with a range over 17,000 nautical miles, and they had guns—lots of them. There were 20 x 5.5-inch dual purpose guns, and 15 quad 40mm Bofors—sixty guns. The nine 16-inch guns wouldn’t fire at planes, but there were there to back up Halsey’s cruisers if that ever became necessary. And to thicken the flak stew further, the two Light AA Cruisers *San Diego* and *San Juan* arrived with the battleships.

‘Knock ‘em Down Halsey’ was ready for a brawl. They were calling him the ‘Knuckle Swinger’ back home, though his battles often were painful and the source of much anxiety when they would hit the headlines. He had lost the *Lexington* at Pearl Harbor, bravely challenging an enemy he had no business attacking at that time, though he did not know that then. He had fought hard at the Koro Sea, and lost the *Hornet*, but he hurt the Japanese even worse.

It was Fletcher’s debacle in the Coral Sea that saw both *Saratoga* and

Yorktown go down that was the real wound inflicted on the fleet. For that, Fletcher had been moved to the battleships, but Halsey never said anything more about the stinging defeat to Fletcher. He would never hit a man when he was down—unless he was Japanese. So Halsey always gave as much as he took in the ring, and always fought his heart out. That's the way the public saw it, and after Doolittle and his raids into the Marshalls, they had come to love the man. The US had been back on its heels for too long after Koro Sea reduced the fleet to just two carriers. Spruance had kept them safe, as Nimitz wanted. Now, with those three new carriers and a host of new planes to go with them, Halsey was going to attack.

He knew Operation Push on Viti Levu was jumping off on January 7th, so he wanted to take the 1st Marine Paras and 8th Marine Regiment out to sea and surprise the Japanese with an attack on the New Hebrides. The island Nimitz and King had fingered was Efate, centrally located and with good airfields that could be rapidly improved. Halsey was going to give it to them.

To coordinate the attack, he would link up with Spruance in TF-12 to complete the cast of his new ensemble. That would add *Enterprise* and *Hornet* to the show, and the two new hybrids, *Gettysburg* and *Vicksburg*, would join *Shiloh* to escort in the transports. The initial rendezvous would be here off the waters of Funafuti in the Ellice Islands. Then the whole group would head for the New Hebrides, with more raw carrier air power than any other operation the US had mounted in the war.

On the other side of the equation, Yamamoto and Ugaki had been planning the development of Japanese power in the lower Solomons. They had Tulagi, and the Raider battalion that took it from them in the old history was busy on Viti Levu. So Now the Japanese were in the process of shipping in aviation support and airfield construction units to get a working airfield at Tulagi. At the same time, a small detachment would be landed amphibiously on Guadalcanal to secure that island, as additional sites had been located and approved for airfields.

That would be a bigger operation than it seemed, for the Japanese were lacking in most essential equipment to adequately build and maintain airfields. They had very few fuel trucks to send from Rabaul, and almost no bulldozers or earth moving equipment. Instead it was pick and shovel work to build a new field, and raw manpower and horses were used on the fields for labor and hauling.

If local labor could not be rounded up and put to work, the garrison troops would have to do the job, and it was hot, sweaty, backbreaking work in the tropical sun. If the troops took to working in the evening or morning to avoid that merciless sun, it was mosquito time, and few avoided bouts of Malaria in the Solomons, though on Fiji that disease was not a problem. Now, in the Monsoon season, the rains could quickly turn an unpaved or reinforced field into a quagmire, and the Japanese would lose more planes to crash landings than to combat in the early days.

Yet in spite of the difficulties, the operation was not aimed at securing Tulagi and Guadalcanal, and two transport groups were already outbound from Rabaul. To cover that operation, Yamamoto had mustered his carrier power into two groups. Carrier Division 1, with the Fleet Flag on *Yamato*, would bring *Kaga* and *Akagi* to the lower Solomon Sea. Meanwhile, Carrier Division 3 under Hara, the victor of Ceylon, would take the outside passage north of the Solomons with *Taiho*, *Tosa*, and the light carriers *Junyo* and *Hiyo*. Both forces then intended to rendezvous as they approached the Santa Cruz Islands, make a quick strike at the small field at Ndeni, and then return to Rabaul.

Yamamoto had no idea that the US was now planning a major offensive. He and Ugaki were still working out how to transfer in fighter support to Noumea and begin to build up air power at Nandi and Tavua, not knowing the US was intending to launch an all-out attack on those fields. They were aware that the 1st USMC Division had been relieved, noted the arrival of the 25th Infantry in its place, but still believed the Americans incapable of mounting any offensive that could seriously bother two crack Army divisions like the 38th and 48th. As for the impending US attack on Efate, the possibility never entered their minds.

On the 10th of January, the two sides suddenly became aware of each other's presence. Halsey had been observing radio silence, so there was no SIGINT to tip off Yamamoto that something was up, but a long range naval search patrol out of Buin had stumbled across the US Fleet and reported carriers. That got the Admiral's attention immediately, particularly since a patrol from Nandi had also reported two groups of US ships to the north of Fiji and moving west. The only thing west of that position was the New Hebrides, and the position of the reported US carriers looked suspiciously like a covering operation.

His own operation had just concluded. Japanese troops were landed safely at Lunga on Guadalcanal, and the aviation support elements had arrived at Tulagi. The Light Carrier *Junyo* was given the honor of sending its dive bombers to attack Ndeni in the Santa Cruz Islands, which was soon to be the target of the next Japanese move southeast once sufficient air operations capability had been established at Tulagi. Now these disturbing sighting reports were cause for some concern.

A signal was sent to Nandi on Fiji, where the Kawaguchi Detachment was slowly approaching the harbor, even as the land battle there drew nearer to that vital outpost. Commander Kanihira was to remain ready to abort his operation and immediately take his valuable transports and troops southwest on a roundabout return journey to Noumea. Then Yamamoto called for Ugaki and asked him to bring in the Captain and XO of *Takami*.

“Why do you summon those officers?” asked Ugaki with a frown.

“I know you think of them as junior officers, and beneath our considerations here, but I find their insight useful. Besides, I have a mission for their ship. They have long range search capability with those helicopters. I want them to verify this carrier contact.”

“Why not send our own planes?”

“Because their aircraft can be stealthy, and also have radars, while our own planes must visually sight the enemy. If they in turn are spotted, then the Americans will know we have carriers within range.”

As Fleet Admirals will always have the last word in any such discussion, Ugaki relented and summoned Harada and Fukada to *Yamato*. When they had arrived, Yamamoto explained the situation and told them what he wanted.

“You will detach from Carrier Division 3 and assume the role of a forward picket. Approach the location of this sighting and use your helicopters to determine the true composition of the enemy, if they are present as reported.”

“How far forward do you want us,” asked Harada.

“As far as necessary to accomplish this task. I will leave that to your judgment. In the meantime, I intend to take the *Kido Butai* west of the New Hebrides. If you can ascertain the location of the enemy, I am prepared to strike.”

“Will we remain in range of support from your carriers?”

“That I cannot guarantee. I would prefer to conceal the position of the

Kido Butai as long as possible.”

“You believe the enemy plans a raid into the New Hebrides?”

“That is quite possible, but your reconnaissance will hopefully give us a clearer picture.”

“Very well, we will depart immediately.”

That was that, but Fukada had some misgivings that he did not voice at the meeting, wary of Ugaki’s disapproving stare. “We’ll be in harm’s way, that’s for sure,” he said to Harada as they boarded the launch to return to *Takami*.

“That’s the commitment we made when we decided to approach these men and offer our service. So now, like good little vassals, we do what this ship was built to do. *Takami* is as good a forward picket as anyone might find in this war.”

“They have to know where the *Kido Butai* is right now,” said Fukada. “Yamamoto just tipped his hat with that raid on Ndeni.”

“We don’t know what they know,” said Harada. “That raid could have been accomplished by a single light carrier, just as it was. *Junyo* sent only 15 planes in for that attack, and they busted up the airfield there pretty good just the same. That carrier could have attacked from anywhere in a 250-mile radius of that island.”

“True, but if the Americans are out there in force, they should take that raid as a wakeup call.”

“Then let’s go find them.” Harada was eager to get back to the ship.

Halsey knew more than Harada realized that hour. The coast watchers on Ndeni had observed both the approach and withdrawal of the planes that raided that island, which narrowed down the location of the enemy carriers that sent them.

“But it was just a pin prick,” said Captain Duncan on the *Essex*. “Word is they got hit with no more than fifteen to twenty planes.”

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” said Halsey. “I want the scout carriers up that way to have a look. We’ve got ten fat transports heading our way, packed to the gills with supplies and the 8th USMC Regiment. I want them delivered in one piece, and with no surprises. Vice Admiral Morton is the convoy master. I think we’d better tell him that if we can confirm enemy carriers, we may have to hold off on Efate until we show them the door.”

That was going to send Captains Gorton and Herndon on the *Vicksburg*

and *Gettysburg* northwest to have that look, and their high flying fighters would stand in for the long range radars that *Takami* would bring to the same duty they had been assigned.

That night *Takami* sailed southeast into harm's way. The SH60J/K Seahawk was up off the deck before dawn, and looking for trouble. In little time they had a contact, several flights of airborne contacts starting to coalesce over a small surface contact bearing 230, just two discrete ships.

"What would a carrier be doing out there with no more than a single ship in escort?" said Harada.

Fukada was leaning over Lieutenant Ryoko Otani's SPY 1 station as the data came in from the Seahawk. "It's the contacts further south that I'm worried about," he said. "They look a whole lot more dangerous. If I had to take a good guess here, I'd say the Americans are going to hit our bases in the New Hebrides."

"I'll pass that on to Yamamoto," said Harada. "In the meantime, the ship will come to battle stations, and air alert 1. If that is a lone carrier to our southwest, it will be looking our way soon."

It was two lone carriers, *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg*, and they were fanning out their search planes to have that look. Yet Halsey was suspicious of a Japanese approach through the nice open sea lane between the Santa Cruz Islands and the New Hebrides. He had already ordered Spruance to send out a small strike group and look the area over. If nothing else, it would be a good live training mission. So not more than thirty minutes later, just after dawn, Otani had some more bad news.

"It looks like Commander Fukada was correct, sir," she said. "I've got four airborne contacts heading our way now, and right on the heading he expected."

That wasn't news Harada wanted to hear. "How in the world did they find us out here, nothing has come close enough to spot us."

"Who knows sir," said Fukada. "But we're right where I'd be looking for trouble if I were the Americans. This was route one for the *Kido Butai* if it was to continue south after hitting Ndeni. Yamamoto was cagey to sidestep west of the New Hebrides like that. For my money, the Americans could be taking a good guess with that package."

"Yes," said Harada. "Well I don't want to see it delivered. Let's see if we can discourage them. Do we have the range yet with our SM-2s?"

“Not yet, sir. I make it another ten minutes at the current closing rate.”

“Then we hit them as soon as they cross our max range line. Two SM-2s, nothing more. I doubt if they’ve seen anything like our missiles before. It might shake them up.”

It did.

The thin streaks of the missile contrails caught the rosy dawn and were impossible to overlook. Hiroko Shiota was tuning in to listen to any chatter from the incoming planes, and they were dumfounded, and quite alarmed, particularly when the leading flight of F4F Wildcats became the intended targets of those SM-2s.

Missile shock had been a weapon Karpov had used on his WWII era enemies from the very first, but as it had also happened before, a diligent US pilot decided to connect the dots. Something had come out of the northwest horizon, trailing that long white contrail, something fast, mean, and deadly. But if they followed that trail it might lead them to whatever had fired of that little 4th of July party. It was his Dauntless from the small group of six off *Vicksburg* that would finally see a lone ship on that empty horizon, and his wing mates were just mad enough to want to get even for the loss of those fighters.

Chapter 14

“Damn,” said Harada under his breath. He looked at Fukada. “I was afraid this might happen.”

“Hell, we can knock them down in five minutes.”

“Yes, well how many SM-2s is that going to leave us under the forward deck?”

As if to answer the Captain, Lt. Hideo Honjo sounded off. “Sir, we expended two of thirty-eight missiles against that initial recon flight, and—”

“I can do the math,” said Harada. “How many bogies?”

“I’m reading 24, and it looks like 12 are up on top cover. Those have to be fighters. The second group is 3000 feet lower, 12 more contacts.”

“Probably the strike package.”

“Why so few?” said Harada. “Didn’t the US carriers pack over eighty planes each?”

“If we were spotted by that recon flight, then they know we’re just a single ship. They wouldn’t empty their flight deck for a lone target.”

“Then we put our missiles on the group at lower altitude,” said Harada. “Maybe if we thin the herd a bit more, we can dissipate this strike without expending much of our defensive capability. We’ll do it in stages. Give me four more SM-2s and we’ll repeat the performance and see if they clap.”

The result was almost preordained—four missiles away, four more planes dead, and another breaking off and making a wide turn, possibly damaged or too shaken up to continue. That was still going to leave seven strike planes, and 32 SM-2s under the deck. The range closed to 40 klicks.

“Fukada, how good are these guys?”

“Anybody’s guess,” said Fukada. “It’s going to be the pilots that will decide that. From the altitude they’re flying, I’d guess these are dive bombers, and they’ll come in right on top of us. If even one gets a bomb on us it won’t be pretty.”

“Alright, I’ll knock down two more and thin out the odds. Then we’ll see what the close in systems can do.”

Harada was even reluctant to expend those last two SM-2s, thinning their inventory to just 30 missiles, and the 12 SM-3s. Yet he did cut the odds in

half, because after those last two missiles went up, only four planes had the stomach to stay in the hunt.

The US pilots had seen the uncanny accuracy of the rockets, watched them swerve and home in on wildly dancing planes trying to avoid them. It was more than shocking to hear the explosions and know that one man after another that you had breakfast with wasn't going to be there for chow the next time you found the mess hall. The four that braved the experience to make their dives were going to meet something different.

The Phalanx could elevate through 80 degrees and it knocked down two. The last two let their bombs fly early and bugged out, hitting nothing but seawater. Thankfully, the other twelve planes were fighters, just as Otani had suggested. They broke off and turned for home.

"No problem," said Fukada. "We probably could have held those last two missiles and let the R2-D2s chew them up." US Navy sailors often called the Phalanx that because of the cylindrical shape of the weapon mount, with its characteristic domed top. Fukada had picked up the slang in the Bars at Yokohama, drinking with American sailors. To hear him use the terms reminded Captain Harada of those days, when the US was an ally, and longtime defender of the new Japan that was built after the war. Here they were, fighting for the Imperial Japanese Empire now, yet most harbored misgivings about the world they might be living in if Japan were to win this war.

Harada still had profound doubts about that prospect. The miracles under his forward deck were running thin.

"That was twelve planes," said Harada. "I'm standing here wondering if we'd be having this conversation if they threw sixty at us."

No one said anything.

"Alright, come about to 020. Feed all present contact info to Yamamoto, and we're off north. We'll scout out towards the Duff Islands to make sure there's nothing sneaking in north of the Santa Cruz Islands."

* * *

It started on the morning of the 11th of January. The Americans had gathered their forces near the Ellice Islands, the wink of the two new scout carriers on the lanterns flashing through the morning haze. *Gettysburg* and

Vicksburg had come all the way from Pearl, bigger versions of the *Shiloh* Class, with two dozen planes each, and 8-inch guns forward where the *Shiloh* had 6-inchers. That ship was also at hand with *Antietam*, to escort the Marine Para Battalion serving as a raiding unit for the planned operation in the New Hebrides.

The *Vicksburg* group was just the scouting and escort element of the American fleet. They would be tasked with feeling the way towards the New Hebrides to look for enemy carriers, the one threat Halsey was there to deal with if necessary. Behind that small task force, 8th Marine Regiment under Colonel Hall had boarded transports in Pago Pago four days ago and was now also closing on the scene.

It was now clear to both sides that the enemy was near. Planes off the *Vicksburg* had been the unfortunate group to stumble on *Takami*, but those off *Gettysburg* had overflowed the many islands, and spotted the carriers that had bombed Ndeni earlier that day.

On the Japanese side, there had been a squadron of 12 Pete float planes at Efate, along with 18 Zeroes, with a number of Kates and Vals that had diverted there months ago in the first big carrier clash, and were never pulled off. One of those planes found TF-11 that morning, and before noon the Japanese sent word to Yamamoto that a strong force composed of carriers and battleships was east of the New Hebrides, and on a westward course. The American scout carriers had also been spotted, and so the travail of *Gettysburg* and *Vicksburg* had only just begun.

Carrier Division 1 could not send dive bombers out that far, but the torpedo planes could make the range. Unfortunately, the weather was stormy and looked to be worsening. That was one factor that had favored the two light hybrids, that and the fact that they had both gone to sea with their primary air groups fighter heavy. The US thought of these ships as defensive escorts and long range scouts, and armed them accordingly with 18 Hellcats and six strike planes, which were mostly used in the naval search role.

So the Japanese would come with a fairly light strike group, just 11 Zeroes escorting in 21 Kates, and they would meet 32 fighters alert on overhead CAP. In the tangled fight over the small task force, the US pilots would get only two Zeroes but nail 10 of those 21 Kates. Those that got through made a plaintive run on the *Vicksburg*, which hit nothing but seawater.

Ten more Kates and eight Zeroes had followed a few minutes later and found an equal number of US Fighters still on the scene. Armed with bombs instead of torpedoes so they could extend their range, the Kates also made an awkward attack from 9000 feet, saw five of their group shot down, and hit nothing.

Aboard *Yamato* with Carrier Division 1, Yamamoto met with Ugaki to review their options.

“Three sightings are now confirmed,” said Yamamoto. “One reports only two ships, but one must be a carrier, as it attacked our picket.”

“What happened?” asked Ugaki, curious as to whether *Takami* could survive an attack by an American carrier.

“*Takami* prevailed, though they report no more than two dozen enemy planes were detected. Your advice to use the torpedo planes in a long range bombing role was clever, but it ultimately failed. Those pilots are not trained in that role. I know you believed it imperative that we launch the first blow, but we should have waited and hit them with a better coordinated strike.”

The weather looks too bad for further operations today,” said Ugaki. “We can close the range tonight, and be ready to strike at dawn. Shall we move west above the New Hebrides?”

Yamamoto thought for a moment. “They know we are here, as the strike on Ndeni and this skirmish with *Takami* would lead them to believe that is exactly what we are doing. So I intend to take a more indirect approach. We will sail south instead, and remain west of the New Hebrides. We also have a few planes left on Efate, so I think we will rendezvous there, perhaps 50 miles west of that island. When we attack, I will order those land based planes to lead the way. That may confuse the Americans even more, particularly when our main strike comes in like *Donryu*, behind that first wave.”

Donryu meant “Storm Dragon,” and it would be a good description of what a massed attack from all the Japanese carriers might look like.

“Very well,” said Ugaki. “I will see that the orders are given. But what if the Americans do move north?”

“We shall see,” said Yamamoto, knowing that this chess game had to be played out one move at a time.

* * *

The same question was now in front of Halsey, and he would answer it for reasons very similar to those that had brought Yamamoto to his decision. The two American strike groups had lingered in the north near the gap between the New Hebrides and Santa Cruz Islands, but no major battle developed. There had only been the inconsequential Japanese sniping at the US scout carriers, which came to nothing.

“What do you make of this,” asked Captain Duncan on the *Essex*. “The Japs are playing things fairly cool up here.”

“I don’t like it,” said Halsey. “I’ve been standing out on the weather deck for the last four hours with this big fat white helmet on to give them something to aim at, but we haven’t seen a single plane. That business with the *Vicksburg* group was a little odd too. Rockets? Hansen reported they started taking down his planes before they ever got anywhere near the ship that fired them. So they had to be radar controlled, and that is good reason to be worried out here. How’d the Japs come up with this dog and pony show?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” said Duncan. “You figure that was an advanced picket?”

“That’s what it looked like, a lone ship out like that, but there was nothing behind it. So now I’m starting to think the Japs are up to something else. They either intended this operation against Ndeni as nothing more than a nuisance raid, or they have other fish to fry—down south.”

“Ndeni isn’t anywhere near the top of our list now,” said Duncan. “I can see that they might want to hit the place, but not with the number of carriers we had a line on yesterday. So you figure they went south?”

“That’s their main beat,” said Halsey. “Every time they sortied in the last three months it was to cover the supply runs out of Noumea into Fiji. Things are heating up on the ground over there now that MacArthur has taken over. That man won’t waste any time getting himself a headline, and he’s got a bone to pick with the Japs after the Philippines. So I think we’ll move south as originally planed and stand west of Efate to wait for the Marines.”

Duncan’s question echoed that of Ugaki. “What if they do come through the north channel behind that picket?”

“We’ll still be able to hit them from where I plan to be. We’ll proceed with our original operation, and see if they want to do anything about it. If they did come south, then they’ll be west of the New Hebrides, that much is

clear, and I think that's where they'll stay. In fact, our job is to keep them there, and out of the waters between there and Fiji."

"What if we head south and nobody shows?"

"Then we do what we came here to do—put those Marines ashore at Efate. After that I'm going to visit Noumea, and then pound the Japs on Fiji for good measure."

That night both sides moved south on roughly parallel tracks, and as it happened, both Yamamoto and Halsey were in the vanguard. Hara's Carrier Division 3 had been up near Ndeni for the raid, then rendezvoused with the *Tosa*, battleship *Fuso* and two heavy cruisers. That force had planned to finish the job at Ndeni, but the sudden detection of enemy carriers scuttled that operation. Instead Yamamoto decided to reinforce Hara with that additional carrier as both divisions headed south, but Hara was over 100 miles behind.

As for Halsey, he led the Spruance group by about 50 miles, and the two scout carriers were even farther north after that encounter with the strange lone picket with those disturbing rocket flak weapons. That was going to bring the principles into direct confrontation on the 14th of January, like two rams butting heads. Halsey would pit his three new *Essex* Class carriers against Yamamoto's Carrier Division 1, composed of the venerable *Kaga*, *Akagi* and *Soryu*.

The Japanese threw the first punch, their long range Kate torpedo bombers out on patrol spotting the US fleet and getting a report off before the American CAP ended that sortie. At the same time, several Dauntless search planes passed north of New Caledonia and spotted the Japanese west of Efate. Three were shot down, but Lieutenant Commander Hamilton got off his report before he died—*spotted three Jap Carriers, course and estimated speed to follow*. That last data never came in, but knowing his flight patrol pattern, the US had a good idea where he was when he made the sighting. That got the hair on the Captain's necks up, and they threw every plane they had into the great skies, keeping their fingers crossed.

As it happened, they were the closest task force to the little action then under way east of Efate, and so they threw up a probing raid that might have been stronger had the information on the location of the American carriers been more refined, or the weather a little better. As it was, several squadrons of Kates veered off course in the heavy cloud cover, and they would all be

late to the party.

68 planes came in a little after 11:00, 37 Vals escorted by 23 Zeroes, but only one squadron of eight Kates. Halsey was waiting for them. He had decided to put up a very thick defensive CAP, and there were all of 67 US fighters assigned that morning, 60 percent of his total fighter strength. It was the heaviest defense the Japanese had ever encountered in their many duels with the fighting Admiral, and it would only get stronger. It wasn't just the numbers of planes involved, but also the kind of planes being flown. The *Essex* Class had been given the new F6F Hellcat, and the plane was about to get its first real field test against the Japanese Zero.

In all that action, a few hot shot pilots off the American carriers started making a name for themselves. Ensigns Hammond, Gilbert, Wars and Long each got three kills. Rice got four. Five of those kills were enemy fighters, and then the defenders took down twelve Vals and a single Kate before the attack finally came in on Halsey's carriers. Then it was white knuckle time, hands on the gunwales, guns elevated and the sky pocking up with dark roses of fire.

Chapter 15

The Japanese pilots were good, all still veterans of the many actions they had fought since Pearl Harbor, but the flak they were now facing was more intense than any they had ever encountered. When the war started, ships like the original *Yorktown* went to sea with an AA suite composed of eight 5-inch guns, a single quad 1.1, and two dozen .50 caliber machineguns. The new *Yorktown* was much better armed, with the same number of 5-inch guns, but a suite of eight quadruple 40mm Bofors, and 46 more 20mm cannon. It was more than three times the firepower of the old ship, and there were three flattops down there throwing all that lead skyward—and three battleships, one assigned to each of the *Essex* Class carriers on close escort.

North Carolina was riding shotgun for *Essex*, and that was a good name for the flak that ship could add to the fight. She had 15 of the dual purpose 5-inch guns, and by this time, her old, unreliable 1.1s had been replaced by 15 new quad 40mm Bofors, making 60 individual guns in that suite alone. Added to that, the ship had another 48 of the 20mm Oerlikon 20mm guns. All three of these gun types would end up being the best of their class for overall AA performance at sea during the war. It wasn't just the numbers that had gotten so much better. The US also had installed better search and fire control radars.

The Japanese came in, one *Shotai* after another, but there were only 32 strike planes left, and as good as they were, they did not score a single hit on the American fleet. There were several close calls, one very near the *Essex*, but Halsey was gratified that the attack had been beaten off with no damage to his ships.

Then, one by one, small groups of enemy torpedo bombers that had gone astray in the heavy weather were finally drawn in to the action. Four of six were shot down in the first group; five of fourteen in the second small wave. Not a single torpedo found a ship's hull, and Halsey was exhilarated. It was good hunting that day for the Fly Boys, and they were in high spirits when the skies finally cleared and they made it back to the carriers.

The enemy had taken the first swing, missing wildly, and got cut up with some good stiff jabs from his CAP as he tried to get inside. Now it was time

to counterpunch. The American strike had launched 45 minutes earlier, and it was over the Japanese fleet at about the same time this action occurred.

Halsey had thrown 67 Dauntless dive bombers and 25 Avenger torpedo bombers at his enemy, though the escort was fairly light, only 21 Hellcats. The Japanese had twice as many fighters up on CAP from Carrier Division 1, and the Long Range CAP from Hara's group was also vectored in to put all of 84 Zeroes in the air.

The fighters swirled above, getting only two of those Zeroes and losing three of their own, then the remaining Zeroes fell on the American strike squadrons and inflicted a good deal of carnage. They would kill 17 dive bombers, damaging 23 more, and kill eight Avengers with damage on five others, heavy losses to pay for the privilege of getting close enough to deliver ordnance on the enemy. But the US flyers had a little luck that day. None of their torpedoes ran true from the few that were launched, but the surviving dive bombers came falling from the sky, the enemy carriers below looking like great fat whales that had breached the surface for air, leaving long white wakes behind them.

Down they came, the trapeze swinging the bombs forward from the centerline of the planes. The first fell close to *Kaga*, a wash of foamy white seawater laced with shrapnel erupting from the port side of the ship. The deck crews in white uniforms and caps shirked when it hit, but the worst they received was that sea spray. One man's arm was streaked red with blood where an errant bit of shrapnel had scored him, but he ignored the wound, dragging out a fire hose in the event something did more damage.

Something did.

Both *Kaga* and *Soryu* would be hit amidships that day. The hit to *Kaga* was the hardest blow, the AA crews on a triple 25mm gun ducking when it struck, erupting on the deck in the midst of three fighters parked for ready CAP. The angry orange fireball erupted, sending a hail of deck planking in all directions, blowing the wing off one plane and sending its propeller spinning wildly up into the air. The explosion blew through the flight deck, where another flock of green winged Kates were clustered. The sudden roar of the explosion and brilliant yellow heat coming through the deck above sent service and ordnance crews running from the scene. Then the real damage was done.

The explosion ignited the carts and sleds bearing ammo and torpedoes for

those planes, and now a second explosion billowed from the side of the ship beneath a column of thickening black smoke above. Heavy fires raged from the deck wound, and one man came running from the edge of the flames, one arm missing, his back on fire, his eyes wide and mouth open with voiceless terror. Three other men were down, screaming from the pain of severe burns. Another was completely immolated, his limp body being consumed by flames fed by the spilled and burning aviation fuel that had ignited in the wings of those fighters.

Off by the island, a waiting pilot stood stunned in shock, slack jawed, slumped against the cold metal of a hatch that was painted red with his own blood. A fragment had grazed his head, slicing off a portion of his scalp. He would live, though he had come within a few millimeters of cold unconscious death. Now all he could do was stare in numbed shock at the scene on the flight deck. The living were dragging the wounded, and the flaming bodies of the dead, from the edge of those searing fires. High above, a flight of three Zeroes were swooping in hot pursuit after those dive bombers, but one veered off and overflew the ship, shocked to get a bird's eye view of the carnage.

Yamamoto had been on the weather deck watching the attack, even as his own ship was straddled by a pair of 100 pound wing mounted secondary bombs that missed by no more than 50 yards. He grimaced when he saw the secondary explosion billow up from the *Red Castle*, the black smoke thick above the wound. The last time *Kaga* had been hit, the damage was done by a single rocket off the mysterious Siberian raider, *Mizuchi*. This time the enemy wore a more familiar face.

The attack quieted at least one fear he had held—that the Siberians would give the Americans their rocket weapons. Captain Harada and his Executive Officer might have told him that was not possible, but he had never asked them about it. Yet to see *Kaga* burning was a most uncomfortable feeling, for he had no idea how bad the damage was at this point.

Now both sides would work to turn over the recovered planes, and get more in the air while the daylight lasted. The action had taken over an hour, and it was not until 01:30 that both sides would begin recovery. Then the process began: lifting planes from the hangars to the flight deck, spotting them, placing chocks, recovering and launching planes assigned to CAP, inspecting ordnance loads, warming up the engines, final briefing for the pilots, and finally, about 45 minutes later, the second strike was ready. This

time it would be much weaker. *Kaga* reported it had to suspend flight operations, and could not even receive its incoming planes, which had to be diverted north toward Carrier Division 3, with another nine ordered to land on Efate.

Soryu was still operational, and *Akagi* unscathed, but they could not get enough planes up to matter against the US defense. The inverse, however, would not be true. Halsey had been appalled at the losses, but was determined to throw everything he had left at the enemy for one more strike. He would turn over 29 Dauntless dive bombers, 17 Avengers and a light escort of 13 Hellcats, and with the enemy defense scattered, they managed to hit the Cruiser *Maya* and put one 500-pound bomb on the *Soryu*. Yamamoto's second wave again came up empty handed, and that was to be the battle.

The Admiral conferred with Ugaki after the last of the American planes had been beaten off a little after 03:30. "We have taken hits, but what is wrong with our pilots today?"

"The weather," said Ugaki. "Many of the squadrons were unable to find the target, and two could not even find their fighter escorts. Those that did attack reported much stronger defenses over the American fleet, and very thick flak. They have a new fighter, and it is very good. And they are learning, but do not be overly concerned. The damage to *Kaga* and *Soryu* is not as bad as it might appear. Neither ship is in any danger of sinking."

"Unfortunately, the damage to our squadrons is what I now worry about," said Yamamoto. "*Kaga* reports the fires will prevent operations for at least another two to three hours, and we do not have enough strike planes left to stay here and continue the fight. I must order this Division back to Rabaul at once."

"But what about Hara? He still has four carriers to the north."

"They may continue south, but their first priority will be to cover our division as it moves to Rabaul. I cannot allow the enemy to find and strike this task force again."

"But sir, the enemy has also suffered. The last wave reported that enemy fighter screens were much lighter."

"Did they report any hits on the American carriers?"

Ugaki was silent, seeing that a sullen expression had settled on the Admiral. "We should have waited for Hara to close up before we attacked, but that would have meant we had to forfeit the advantage of striking the first

blow. Unfortunately, we did not hurt our enemy today, and there were reports of at least four other enemy carriers that have still not been engaged. No. This battle is over. I will move to Rabaul and concentrate on getting *Kaga* and *Soryu* back in fighting trim as soon as possible. Hara will not be permitted to face the entire American fleet alone. Order him to follow us once we get northwest of his position.”

“What about the Kawaguchi Detachment from Noumea?”

“Has it landed at Nandi?”

“It was completing unloading operations an hour ago,” said Ugaki.

“Then get those transports back to Noumea, but they should travel well south. We will not be here to contest or cover the normal transit route from Noumea to Fiji.”

Ugaki had a very frustrated feeling, for it was obvious that they had suffered a setback here, though he would not allow himself to speak the word defeat. What if the enemy remained on station, he thought? That would allow them to claim a victory here, though Yamamoto is taking great pains to see to the safety of those two wounded carriers out there. He knows the future war effort depends on them.

“Very well,” he said. “I will see Hara receives the proper orders. At least our intended objectives were fulfilled here. We struck the American airfield at Ndeni as planned, and successfully covered the transport of Kawaguchi’s troops to Fiji.”

“Yes,” said Yamamoto, “and now I wonder how soon it will be before we begin planning their withdrawal.”

There was an uncomfortable interval, for the Admiral had used a word seldom spoken by the Japanese. They had no word for retreat, though it was clear that Yamamoto was not speaking of a redeployment. He meant what he had said.

“Withdrawal? I can see the wisdom in protecting our carriers now,” said Ugaki, “but the issue on Fiji is far from being settled.”

“Is it?” said Yamamoto. “Kawaguchi’s troops were intended to bolster the garrison on New Caledonia. The Army already has two of its best divisions at Viti Levu, but they still need reinforcements. MacArthur has assumed command of those operations, and the Americans now have three divisions in the Fiji group. Who knows when they will bring more troops to that battle. And let us not forget that these divisions relieved their Marines, and they will

still have those troops in reserve. Quite frankly, I believe Operation FS has already failed.”

“What?” Ugaki was not willing to concede that, or even seriously contemplate it. “With Kawaguchi’s troops landed on Viti Levu, the Army should be able to counterattack.”

“Do not humor me, Admiral,” said Yamamoto. “I have read the reports of the ground action there. Our airfield at Tavua is already under enemy artillery fire, and they also managed to flank that position through the highlands to attack the field at M’ba. This leaves us with only one operational airfield at Nandi, and intelligence reports that the Americans have three good airfields operational—two of them on Vanua Levu where we have not landed a single soldier. They have over 100 fighters over those islands now, and how many planes are left at Nandi?”

Ugaki knew the answer to that, but said nothing. When the US Carriers moved in, Ugaki had ordered their better Zero Squadrons to move to Noumea. Now there was only a small group of fighters left at Nandi, and they were mostly flying the obsolete AM5s. All the D3As that had been based there were pulled off—just a few planes that remained after trying to get at Suva through those thick American fighter patrols.

Yamamoto had put his finger squarely on the real wound that was promising to be fatal where Fiji was concerned. The Americans had control of the airspace over those islands, and only the arrival of the IJN carriers could contest it. That move had just been checked and repulsed by the American fleet, and both men knew what this meant. Yamamoto was willing to voice it, Ugaki was not, but he understood, deep down, the truth in what his commanding officer was saying.

“We are overextended,” said Yamamoto. “It will now become a question of whether or not we can continue to sustain the army troops already committed to the Fiji operation. The Army is already complaining that we have not sent our battleships to pound the enemy airfield at Suva. Soon they will have much more to complain about.”

“Then we must order our fighter squadrons back to Nandi.”

“Should we? How many landed safely at Noumea? The report I read stated that no more than eighteen planes remain in that group. Where will we find the planes to contest the numbers the Americans now have?”

“We have two squadrons at Tulagi—eighteen more planes there. And

there is another squadron at Buin that could be moved.”

“That would make 45 planes,” said Yamamoto, “half as many as the Americans are reported to have.”

“We have three more squadrons at Rabaul.”

“True, but have you tallied our losses? Those planes will be needed to fill out the squadrons on our carriers. I do not mean to sound like a defeatist, but we must be very cautious now. We were lucky there was not more damage done to our ships, but we must also rebuild our strike squadrons. Those planes are in very short supply. We have plenty of Zeroes at Truk, but very few strike planes in reserve.”

“There is a big group of D3As at Koepang on Timor. They were sent there to make sure the Allies could not reach Darwin from the Indian Ocean through the Timor Sea. We could transfer them to Combined Fleet.”

“That is a good start,” said Yamamoto, but Timor is nearly 2000 air miles from Rabaul.”

“I will handle the transfer,” said Ugaki. “They can move to Amboina first, then make the jump to New Guinea.”

“But we have not developed many airfields along the east coast of that island.”

“The field at Hollandia is sufficient, and then they can move to Lae.”

“Lae? Saburo Saki called that airstrip nothing more than a glorified mud hole. He told me the fighters there were losing planes to accidents on landing during training runs, which is why we ordered all those planes to Port Moresby, Buin, and Tulagi.”

“Correct, but we could simply send one of the carriers north to hover off Hollandia and pick up these planes.”

It was evident to both men that the logistics of rebuilding the shattered strike wings would now take some careful planning if the *Kido Butai* were to remain a potent force. All of Hara’s strike planes were in good shape, but those of Carrier Division 1 had been badly depleted. When the fires prevented *Kaga* from recovering her strike wave, she turned northwest with no more than six planes.

The grim reality that both men were now facing was the dwindling numbers of planes and carrier trained pilots. A third of the superb force Japan had opened the war with were now dead. Even the planes Ugaki was thinking to transfer from Timor were second line pilots, with very good morale but

only modest combat experience. The great shock of this action had been the fact that the Americans had so quickly replaced their losses, clotting the skies with new planes and pilots at an alarming rate. Yamamoto knew that Japan could never hope to match the tremendous industrial production of the U.S.

As for Operation FS, the Army was in the Fiji Group for one reason, to build or control airfields that could insure control of the airspace around those islands. This had already failed, as Yamamoto clearly pointed out. The carriers the Admiral was so carefully husbanding now existed for only one purpose, to bring aircraft to a given place and control airspace, and to deny that to the enemy by attacking their carriers. It was all about the planes. None of the garrisons on any of the islands that had been seized mattered. It was all about the airfields those islands could provide.

“Get me hard numbers on planes remaining at sea,” said Yamamoto. “Then start looking for replacements. If necessary, we can recall the Ozawa group from Singapore, and the two light carriers we left at Sasebo. I will want your report before we reach Rabaul.”

Ugaki’s pencil would be very busy the next two days, and it was grim reckoning. As he tallied things up, he was slowly beginning to see the shadow that had darkened Yamamoto’s vision, and the reason for his caution. Hara was in good shape with 180 planes, but Carrier Division 1 had been reduced to 71. He looked all over the South Pacific, slowly finding and transferring planes to Navy command. There were those 32 D3As from Timor, 22 more in Saigon, 9 in Manila, 14 at Kobe with another 13 B5Ns. That was 90 more strike planes, enough to restore the *Kido Butai* to near full strength, but there was almost nothing left behind them. Another battle like the one just fought would leave the Navy woefully short of striking power, or so he now believed.

Here I am scrounging for planes, he thought bitterly, and all to replace aircraft that these strangers from another time boasted they would protect. Now where is that damn picket ship, he wondered? Yamamoto should not have detached that ship as he did. It was too far north to be of any use today. But it was just a single ship, and how many of those rockets remain? I will have to ask that question as well, as I am sure the Admiral will want to know.

He reached for his code book, still getting used to the new cyphers that had been instituted at the urging of the interlopers aboard *Takami*. Minutes later he had drafted a special message to the Chief of the Imperial Naval

General Staff, Admiral Osami Nagano. He was the one man senior to Yamamoto, and the only man who could authorize what he was now requesting—the Shadow Fleet.

Part VI

Shadow Fleet

“The fiercest serpent may be overcome by a swarm of ants.”

— Admiral Isokoru Yamamoto

Chapter 16

It had been building for some time, a product of forward looking realization that war was imminent. As early as 1938, it led Japanese naval planners to acquire ocean liners that had been quietly altered to place the large interior ballrooms and dining halls in locations that would serve perfectly as aircraft hangars. It prompted designers to build out barbettes on their 6-inch gun class cruisers, but make them large enough to quickly substitute an 8-inch turret instead. Among those in the know, it was simply called the shadow fleet.

The mammoth battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi* were actually among the first ships to emerge from that shadow, vessels which ended up being much larger and more formidable than US intelligence first thought when they learned they were under construction. There had actually been a plan for five such ships, but only those first two would ever sail as battleships. The third would be converted to the carrier *Shinano*, and the last two hulls were going to be cancelled. One was called “Warship 111,” and the last “Warship 797.” The keel for 111 was laid down and the hull partially completed, but neither would be built. Instead the steel allocated to get those two started would be used to build another ship using the plans for *Shinano*. The Battle of the Koro sea, and particularly the loss of both *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, had pushed that decision through.

That fourth ship would be called *Shingen*, after the famous Samurai leader Takeda Shingen from Kai Province. Known as the ‘Tiger of Kai,’ he had a fearsome reputation in old feudal Japan. Sometimes called “Taro” by his nickname, the builders took to calling the ship that as well. By any name, the ship was building out to be as fierce and rugged in design as *Shinano*, though it would not appear for some time.

But this was not the only shadow lurking in the shipyards of Japan. Things were not as grievous as Yamamoto made it seem. In 1940, when the arguments about the need and efficacy of more battleships and battlecruisers had reached their crescendo, it led to the cancellation of many ships slated for that category, particularly within the *Amagi* and *Kii* battlecruiser classes. The

proponents of naval air power, Yamamoto a leading figure in that group, had seen they were laid to rest... but not buried.

Admiral Yamamoto had revealed this to Harada and Fukada before they departed for the Indian Ocean mission to secure Ceylon.

“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.”

The two ships completed in the class, *Amagi*, and *Kagami*, were works of art, with the same long forecastle, clipper bow, and swept decks of the *Yamato* class, only with nine 12.2-inch guns. They were also better protected than any heavy cruiser they might encounter, with 210mm belt armor and 180mm on the conning tower, and they were very fast at nearly 34 knots, with a 12,000 nautical mile endurance. Some called them fast battlecruisers, but the Japanese classified them as super Type A cruisers. Their analogue in the Royal Navy was the new *Knight* Class battlecruiser that had been a scaled down version of the KGV class battleship, only with ten 10-inch guns instead of 14-inches.

These two ships had completed early war service, covering the invasion of the Philippines, and then returned to Sasebo for additional work on their AA suite and more recently, the addition of radar. The next two hulls would be built out as carriers, two ships Yamamoto had also mentioned to Captain Harada, the *Shirane* and *Mikasa*. And a fifth hull in that class was already afloat. Originally planned as the battlecruiser *Ashitaka*, it had instead been built out as the carrier *Akagi*.

Yet Yamamoto had not revealed everything to Harada and Fukada. Concerning the two *Kii* Class ships that he had mentioned, there had actually been *four* hulls laid down, with two completed to become the superb new fast battleships *Hiraga* and *Satsuma*. The last two hulls were wreathed in that

shadow that lay over this hidden fleet construction program. Now the Navy would produce something more, born of that same compromise between battleship and carrier that had led so many nations to design hybrid ships.

Those last two hulls meant for the *Kii* Class had been well on their way to becoming fast battleships as originally conceived when that construction was halted, then secretly resumed to convert those ships to carrier designs. They already had two of the five twin 41cm main guns installed forward when that order was given, (one on each of the two hulls), and designer Yuzuru Hiraga soon argued that it would slow construction down considerably if they had to be removed, along with the barbettes and magazines, with the entire forward section reconfigured.

Hiraga was a very influential man, who had first learned his craft in the Royal Naval College at Greenwich. He then led the design team for the battleships *Yamashiro* and *Hiei* before becoming Director of Shipyards in 1913. The driving force behind Japan's naval programs, Hiraga had a particular genius for getting as much power and speed possible within the limits of existing treaties before the war. This was why many Japanese ships had as many as five main gun turrets, and the *Kii* Class was one of those designs.

The guns were already placed up front, he argued, so why not leave well enough alone, and then simply build out the rest of the ship as a carrier? The Germans had the *Goeben*, the Americans had *Shiloh*, *Antietam*, *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg*, and the Japanese already had commissioned two small hybrid scout carriers, *Mezu* and *Gozo*, though both were lost in the Gilberts the previous year. Very pleased with the battleship class that now bore the designer's name, (*Hiraga*), the navy relented and sanctioned the secret program. Hiraga delivered.

Now the two ships sat in the harbor at Sasebo, just turned over to the fleet at Nagano's order, and with the newest planes off the production lines, ready for trials. There was still a good deal of fitting out to do, and the crews were still adjusting the boilers for proper pressure. Normally, these ships would take another six months before being fully commissioned, but the need was very great, and Admiral Nagano had decided to put the ships into the hands of his navy professionals and see what could be done. The first was *Kinryu*, the 'Golden Dragon,' and its sister ship was the *Ryujin*, the 'Dragon God,' mythical ruler of the sea.

Without the other main gun turrets and barbettes, and a much simpler superstructure, the weight of the ships was reduced from an anticipated 48,500 tons to 38,000, about the same general displacement as *Kaga* and *Akagi*. Along with that weight reduction, four knots of extra speed were gained, pushing the ship to an expected 34 knots. Endurance was also improved by 50% to 12,000 nautical miles. A single vertical stack was retained but moved to the port side allowing for a long flight deck of 200 meters, only 5 meters shorter than the *Blue Dragon*. Interior spaces allowed for a carrier air wing of 48 planes to be stored on the hangar deck, with additional room for 12 planes on the flight deck.

The twin 16-inch gun turret up front also made this ship a perfect commerce raider, and one that could either outrun or engage enemy cruisers at the Captain's discretion. The ship also had 16 of the new 10 cm/65 (3.9") Type 98 AA guns, eight per side, which was perhaps the best Naval AA gun Japan would produce in the war. To compliment these there were 16 upgraded 25mm AA guns on each side with improved elevation, range finding, and magazine capacity. Radar gave the ship night vision, making it a good ship for forward picket deployment as well.

These new dragons were going to be pressed into service as soon as possible, and complete the lengthy testing and shakedown period during active service. The very existence of these ships had been a closely guarded secret, and they were also a reason why the Navy was so desperately short of carrier strike planes. The wings allocated to *Kinryu* and *Ryujin*, along with those for the *Shirane* and *Mikasa* fleet carrier conversions, had been segregated from the main fleet and jealously protected. They were being allocated the newest aircraft off the production lines as well.

When Admiral Nagano first toured the *Golden Dragon*, he was so impressed that he quickly authorized several other conversion proposals that had been subject to debate. The carriers always needed fast cruisers to run with them. The four *Takao* class ships were excellent in that role, and later, four more ships were planned with improvements, two of which were built out as *Tone* and *Chikuma*. That was a new class that combined the firepower and speed of a heavy cruiser with the scouting ability of a seaplane carrier, with six Aichi E13A float planes that could range out 1300 miles.

"Why not use these hybrid designs to fulfill that same role?" asked Nagano, and the answer was soon to come. Two additional hulls had been

completed for another pair of *Tone* Class cruisers, but they had been cancelled, the hulls scheduled for scrapping to provide steel for other projects. That order was quickly rescinded when *Chikuma* was beaten to near scrap by *Mizuchi*, along with the old battleship *Mutsu*.

“There is the steel we need,” said Nagano. “It will take two years in the repair yards to restore those ships to what they were. Then all we will have is old *Mutsu* back again. I know there has been talk of converting that ship, and the *Ise* and *Hyuga*, to hybrid seaplane carriers, but they would all be too slow at only 23 knots to serve as a fleet scout ship. This is why we sent the Hawks back to their cages.”

Nagano was referring to the *Taiyo* Class, all with names relating to hawks. They were three Escort Carriers converted from ocean liners acquired by the navy before the war, and activated in Phase I of the Shadow Fleet program, but the Navy was not happy with them because of their slow speed. They served well enough in the first months of the war, mostly as invasion escorts. Now the Navy needed faster ships to dance on the high seas with the Americans, and so the Hawks were sent back to the dry docks to improve their propulsion systems. They began with four Kampon water tube boilers, and they would each get two more, hopefully improving power and speed from 21 knots to 30.

Nagano’s idea had a lot of merit. “Why not scrap *Chikuma* and *Mutsu*, and then build out more ships like the *Tone*? Better yet, why not build more of these fast hybrid carriers like *Gozo* and *Mezu*, only bigger, on a hull the size of *Tone*? Then it could carry both seaplanes as well as fighters.”

Nagano’s logic was sound, and his authority, supported enthusiastically by Yamamoto, would see the project come to life. It would be called the *Okami* Class, named for the Fox Kami that was a bit of a shapeshifter in Japanese Mythology, renowned for its stealth and far seeing abilities. What the Japanese would do is take those last two hulls that had been reserved for the *Tone* class, and build yet another hybrid design. It was much bigger and heavier than the *Gozo* class, at 15,000 tons. *Okami* and *Kitsune* were the first two conversions, and they could run at 34 knots, with a very long service range of 14,000 nautical miles. Like the *Vicksburg*, they would carry 24 planes, twice as many as the smaller *Gozo* Class that had trail blazed this hybrid concept.

The idea was further enhanced when designers decided that a special

aircraft might be used to give the ships that long seeing vision that a scout ship would need. The Navy had issued a specification in early 1942 for a long range, high speed, single engine carrier based recon plane—and the need for speed was going to rule out any float plane design. Nakajima won the contract and the C6N *Saiun* was the prototype they delivered, and much earlier than in the old history because of the ships waiting for such a plane.

The Homare 24-Ru turbocharged engine was fine tune to develop better power at altitude, and the plane became a reality in January of 1943. The first models were being assigned to the scout carriers, and they soon demonstrated some remarkable abilities. Able to fly at 380 MPH, with a service ceiling of 35,240 feet and the astounding range of 2886 nautical miles due to its low mounted laminar flow wing housed fuel tanks. Named after the iridescent high altitude clouds it could reach, the *Saiun* would soon prove very useful on these smaller capacity carriers, allowing the larger fleet carriers to use all their dive bombers and torpedo planes in the strike role.

The designers were now wholly embracing the shapeshifting mindset themselves, particularly after what they had seen the Americans do with the *Vicksburg* Class. They already had a third *Gozo* Class scout carrier ready at Kobe, the *Kiryu*, armed with 12 fighters. It would now be joined by these two new *Okami* Class hybrid scouts.

This work, and the steel required to build all these ships, came at a price. The *Unryu* Class Fleet carrier project was not started in August of 1942 as it had been historically. Instead, the Japanese were opting for faster hybrid conversions, even if they could not carry as many planes. These ships would all appear at least a year earlier than the *Unryu* fleet carrier design, and given the pace of US production, sooner and smaller was deemed better than later and bigger.

“Even the fiercest serpent may be overcome by a swarm of ants,” said Yamamoto. “But if we build these hybrids, there must be enough of them to matter. Build four of these foxes instead of two.” The last two would be *Tenke* and *Tama*, to be available later in 1943.

So they were all building, in various stages of completion, some being rushed past the lengthy breaking in of sea trials and right into service. When completed, they would lengthen the register of Japanese ships considerably, adding fleet carriers *Shinano* and *Shingen*, which would be the largest carriers in the world when complete, with enough deck and hangar space to

hold 96 planes. The *Amagi* hull conversions, *Shirane* and *Mikasa*, could each carry 84 planes; then *Kii* Class hull conversions, *Kinryu* and *Ryujin*, would bring another 48 plus 12 spares each. The smaller *Tone* hull conversions *Okami*, *Kitsune*, *Tenko* and *Tama* could carry 24 each, and the *Gozo* Class *Kaya* and *Kiryu* had 12. All together that would send up to 540 planes to sea, assuming the industry could produce them in time. It would double the striking power of the carrier squadrons, and help Japan maintain some edge in that category for the next six months. Some wings already existed, and work was now feverishly switching over from Army type production to carrier capable planes.

Then there was one last addition to the fleet spawned by the need to have destroyers with the carrier fleet at sea. Many of the existing classes were too short in range, so the plans for the super destroyer *Shimakaze* were expanded to build out a complete destroyer division. That ship was the only one of its class ever built in the old history, but here they would start with a full division of five: *Shimakaze*, *Kitakaze*, *Hayakaze*, *Natsukaze*, and *Fuyukaze*. Among the fastest ships in the world at 40 knots. They were much like the Russian Destroyer Leader *Tashkent*, or the French *Le Fantasque*, which still held the record at over 45 knots. They would steam 8000 nautical miles, and carry both the Type 93 Torpedo as well as depth charges, along with decent AA protection. In them, the fleet was getting a superb destroyer screen capable of engaging both enemy surface ships and submarines.

This was the shadow fleet, Phase II of the program now being rushed into production at all levels at Yamamoto's urging, and fully approved by the Emperor. Even though it might appear that the Japanese would be able to keep pace with the Americans into 1943, the production effort had but one flaw. The carrying capacity of the hybrid ships was much lower than a purpose-built carrier designed from scratch. Even if it could join the war twice as fast, with would hit with half the punch.

When the fleet finally arrived at Rabaul on the 17th, both the stricken carriers docked and engineers swarmed aboard to make an assessment of the damage. *Kaga* had the most serious problems, and it would take at least 38 days to repair, even with an all-out effort. *Soryu* was expected to be back in service in 16 days, and the cruiser *Maya* in two weeks. Both Yamamoto and Ugaki were greatly relieved when they heard the news concerning *Soryu*.

Now all Ugaki had to do was find the planes to rebuild the shattered air

wings. If necessary, he could order Ozawa's two light carriers at Singapore to move to Rabaul, bringing in another 60 planes. To do so he had to cancel a planned supply run to Ceylon, as there would be no carrier covering force, and the British had replenished their losses in the Indian Ocean, restoring their Far East Fleet to three carriers again. As for fighters, there were plenty of Zeroes in theater, but many were assigned to land bases. He wanted those valuable carrier capable planes and pilots reserved for use by the carriers, and got very tough with the Army, demanding they take over responsibility for bases on the front lines.

As a result, 27 Ki-27B "Nate" fighters had already been transferred from a rear area assignment at Kavieng, hopping first to Tulagi, and then on to Efate. 30 Ki-30 "Ann" light level bombers would follow and land at Luganville on Espiritu Santo. They had been at Port Moresby to watch the North Cape area, but sea traffic was very light in that region.

The message Ugaki sent to Admiral Nagano concerned those planes being held in reserve for the new carriers. He wanted the strike wings from ships that could still not enter into immediate operations, and he also asked for permission to utilize any ship in the shadow fleet that was deemed seaworthy at this time. Nagano had been wanting to wait until the Emperor's birthday in April, delivering the new arrivals as a present, but he replied that the request would be taken under consideration. When Ugaki learned that ships like *Kinryu* and *Ryujin* were close to delivery, he was elated, for neither he nor Yamamoto thought they would be ready for at least another six months.

Things were beginning to shape up, until two more bits of bad news arrived. The first was a submarine sighting of two unidentified medium sized carriers training near Midway. They later learned these with the light carriers *Independence* and *Princeton*. Then, on the 17th of January, word came in that the American fleet was landing Marines on Efate....

Chapter 17

That night Yamamoto convened a meeting to discuss options. Efate was considered to be the most important island in the French New Hebrides, and it was no wonder that it had been targeted. It was fairly large, 25 miles long and 18 miles wide. The northwest was thickly wooded highland country, with

hills peaking at a little over 600 meters. The southeast was a broad and flat plain, cut in half by the thin Teouma River, with plantations, and lighter woodland. It was well suited for much more development if additional airfields were needed.

“What is the defense on that island?” he asked, and Ugaki was ready, knowing this would be one of the first questions the Admiral posed.

“Two battalions of French infantry from their Tonkin Division that transferred from Saigon last year,” he said, “along with a few coastal guns and aviation support crews for the airfield at Vila off Meli Bay.”

“There are no Japanese troops?”

“Not at the moment.”

The Admiral frowned, but he knew where all the Japanese troops were, locked in a death struggle with the Americans on Viti Levu. The Ichiki Regiment had been posted to New Caledonia, and the recently arrived Kawaguchi Detachment had been meant to reinforce that garrison and also provide additional troops for other islands like Efate and Espiritu Santo, but it had just gone to Fiji.

“Not a very satisfactory situation,” said the Admiral. “In this we see the reason the Americans withdrew their better Marine troops from Fiji. Now they tie down our best troops there, while they are free to begin a counteroffensive. Our setback at sea has opened the door for them, but we cannot allow this attack to go unanswered. The question now is what to do if we have no troops available to reinforce that island?”

“*Dai-nijū Shidan*, has just arrived at Rabaul,” said Imamura, the same man that had been plucked from the sea by the crew of *Takami*, and now acting as overall commander for Army operations in this theater. The unit he spoke of was the 20th Division under General Shigemasa Aoki, newly arrived from Korea where it had been a back waters garrison division for some time. It was there to begin fleshing out bases seized in Papua New Guinea, and the Solomons. Now it would stand as a good source of reserve ground troops for the entire theater.

“So we have more rice in the bin than I first thought,” said Yamamoto. “Are these troops combat ready?”

“They had limited experience in Manchukuo,” said Imamura, “but a few weeks hard training should get them ready.”

“Limited experience? The Americans will be using some of their toughest

troops to make an assault landing like this.”

Imamura shrugged. “Considering that the Navy has been unable to prevent that, the Army will do what it can to correct the... situation.” That skirted very close to the thin line that separated comment from insult, and Imamura had been deft enough to stop himself from using the word ‘error’ at the end.

Yamamoto gave him a long look, the silence carrying the weight of his displeasure, though it would remain unspoken. Both he and Imamura had the enormous burden of ‘face’ to carry for their respective services, where the rivalry was often too hotly pursued.

“Then the Army will make troops available for a counterattack?”

“If necessary,” said Imamura. “And I would select the Ichiki Regiment, replacing it with troops from *Dai-nijū Shidan*. Then they can use the time on New Caledonia to acclimate to this area and continue training and preparation for combat. As for the American Marines, Kiyonao Ichiki and his troops will be more than a match for anything they send... Assuming our men can be safely landed on the island in question.” The General’s remark again skirted the frontier of insult and accusation, though Yamamoto said nothing.

He knew Imamura’s troops were having some difficulty on Fiji, where they had been unable to protect two of the three key airfields. The Army decried the lack of air support from the Navy; then Ugaki had demanded the Army send its own aviation squadrons, saying it was not the navy’s job to use its carrier trained pilots to defend Army held airfields. Those planes could not be found in time to matter, and the last obsolete A5M that had been at Nandi was shot up and made a forced landing there on the 19th of January.

“General,” said Yamamoto. “May I have your opinion of the overall strategic situation—specifically, the prospects for either taking or holding Viti Levu?”

“It would have been taken long ago, but the enemy was permitted to reinforce it by sea. That is the root of all our difficulties. Now we have been forced to commit far more troops there than we ever anticipated, leaving very little to hold all the other territories occupied last year. If you continue to allow the Americans freedom of movement on the seas around these islands, what can the Army do to save the matter?”

Without addressing the obvious blame in Imamura’s discourse, the Admiral pressed him further. “As a strategist, do you believe it was wise for

us to undertake Operation FS?”

“It would have been a near mortal blow if it had been well coordinated and control of the seas had been maintained.”

Ugaki could bear no more, and at the risk of reprimand, he interrupted. “The Navy maintained control of the seas from the moment of the invasion until December of 1942. We defeated the enemy in the Coral Sea, and again in the Koro Sea, though not without cost. In spite of that, we have held the American carriers at bay all this time, yet now they return in much greater strength. And may I also remind you that were it not for the Navy, you would not be here at this moment to offer these opinions.” He folded his arms, a sour expression on his face.

Imamura took a deep breath, thinking to answer, but Yamamoto intervened. “We do not look to assess blame here, only to ascertain the course we must now take to assure victory. General, my real question is this—should we continue to contest Viti Levu and further strive to clear and occupy the other nearby islands, particularly Vanua Levu? The enemy has now built at least two more airfields, and the ground action on the main island has made use of the fields there... problematic. Without well defended local airfields, we must maintain a constant carrier presence to contest air superiority. This, too, is problematic, and now this news of the American invasion at Efate is most disturbing.”

“Why was it aloud to proceed?”

“Frankly, it came as a surprise to us all. We knew the Americans had relieved their Marines with Army troops, but did not expect they would use them in an offensive action again so soon. Now Efate is under threat of enemy occupation, and yes, it will require hard fighting Japanese troops to prevent that. Unfortunately, both *Soryu* and *Kaga* took damage in the recent action, and so this left our 1st Carrier Division with little striking power. It was therefore necessary to redeploy those ships here to Rabaul to begin repairs immediately, and to replenish the air wings, which were badly depleted in the recent engagement with the enemy.”

“Admiral, sir,” came another voice, low and gruff. It was Admiral Chuichi Hara, the bull necked man the navy had come to call ‘King Kong.’ He had been listening quietly from his seat at the far end of the table, but now he was compelled to speak.

“My 3rd Carrier Division was not engaged in the recent action, and *Akagi*

was not damaged from Nagumo's 1st Division. Why not permit me the honor of settling this matter, at least from the standpoint of the Navy. Simply transfer *Tosa* and *Akagi* to my division, and I will deal with the Americans."

Yamamoto smiled, nodding appreciatively. Thus far, Hara had been the Navy's most reliable carrier commander. He had 5th Division at Pearl Harbor, fought well in the Java Sea operations, and most recently, he had conducted the very successful Indian Ocean Operation that delivered the ripened fruit of Ceylon to the Empire. What Hara set his mind to do, was as good as finished, and Yamamoto had invited him to this meeting for precisely the action he now proposed.

"Admiral Hara," said Yamamoto, "I would be honored if you would undertake this mission, as long as you bear in mind that we will not have *Soryu* back for two weeks, and *Kaga* for another month. Under these circumstances, I cannot afford to lose another fleet carrier, even if we were to sink two such ships on the enemy side in exchange. The production capability of our enemy is not something we can underestimate ever again. Look how they have already replaced all the carriers we sunk last year, even giving them the same names, as if to taunt us. We cannot hope to keep pace with them if they continue to build ships this quickly, so if we fight, we must be very skilled, and win without losing."

Win without losing—in that twisted phrase, the Admiral had placed his finger clearly on the heart of the matter. Japan could not afford further losses to her hard-pressed Navy, even in victory.

"Admiral," said Hara. "If you allow me to strike, I can guarantee you that we will win, and the enemy will do the losing."

Yamamoto was silent for a time, then he nodded. "Very well," he said. "*Tosa* and *Akagi* will be transferred to 3rd Carrier Division with all available strike planes. Admiral Ugaki, will you see the proper orders are given?"

Ugaki offered a shallow bow in confirmation, and Yamamoto detailed the operation he envisioned. "Muster near the American held island of Ndeni, but not close enough for their coast watchers to spot you. Reconnoiter the airfield, as we believe many enemy planes may have been diverted there after that last engagement. Strike that airfield, then move south to destroy the American invasion convoy. This will clear the way for us to move additional forces to Efate. I think we can all agree that island must be contested, neh?"

Everyone was in agreement. Efate flanked Noumea, and if it fell, it would

put enemy fighters within range of Noumea and Luganville on Espiritu Santo, and offer the enemy a base from which they could attack either of those outposts. Efate was the center of the board in this chess game, and Yamamoto was still impressed with the boldness the Americans had shown.

“I might remind you that this Admiral Halsey has returned—the ‘Fighting Admiral,’ or so he is called in the American newspapers. He was able to beat Nagumo when our 1st Carrier Division engaged him last week. The Americans have three new fleet carriers, and new planes as well, particularly the new fighter they call the Hellcat, which our pilots say is very good. So, we will try again, as we must, and send our own Fighting Admiral—King Kong.”

Hara smiled, bowing his head appreciatively.

“Yet I have not yet heard an answer from General Imamura concerning the overall strategic situation. Should we continue to leave two full divisions, and two additional regiments on Fiji? Are we overextended?”

“Are you suggesting we withdraw?” Imamura finally used the word, just as Yamamoto had in his discussion with Ugaki.

“I suggest nothing. I ask the Army’s opinion of the situation. Is that where you wish to fight? Is Fiji to be the all or nothing turning point of this war?”

“The army is already there. Moving it elsewhere would be... problematic.”

“Perhaps, but if you felt the need to redeploy to the New Hebrides to reinforce the French garrisons, the Navy would do whatever was necessary to see that was carried out satisfactorily.”

“I could not contemplate such a redeployment without the approval of the Imperial General Staff, and perhaps even that of the Emperor himself.”

In all this inquiry, Imamura said nothing of what he had shared with 17th Army Commander Hyakutake. Things were afoot that would soon bring considerably more Army troops to the South Pacific, but he did not wish to disclose this until that was confirmed and announced by Imperial General Headquarters. Yet Imamura was not being entirely truthful. The arrival dates for units being transferred from China were uncertain. In the meantime, the situation required... Flexibility. He would later make a quiet request to Yamamoto that fast destroyers be made available in order to redeploy certain units to New Caledonia and better balance his overall force structure.

“I see... Of course,” said Yamamoto. “However, unless and until you

deem it necessary to seek permission for a larger redeployment, I must assume that you are wholeheartedly committed to the Fiji operation. That being the case, General, can you be as direct as Admiral Hara here and promise the Emperor a victory?”

“I can promise him we will do all in our power to achieve that—even if it means we fight to the last man.”

Yamamoto did not like the sound of that. “I asked Admiral Hara to win without losing,” he said, “yet to fight to the last man would surely be to lose without winning. It may sound honorable and brave, but in the end, it is nothing more than *seppuku*. If we lose all those troops on Fiji, what then? Is the 20th Division enough to hold the New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Tulagi, Buin, Buka, the Shortlands, and all the rest? Surely we must find a different way of pleasing our Emperor.”

“Admiral,” said Imamura. “I would no sooner see the 38th and 48th Divisions lost in battle as you would welcome the loss of two more fleet carriers. Yet there we are, and there we fight. I will raise the question of the wisdom of holding Fiji with the Imperial General Staff, and they will decide the matter, not I.”

“Well enough,” said Yamamoto, “but realize time is a factor here. Perhaps Admiral Hara can buy us that, but I think it wise if the General Staff reaches a decision before the end of this month.”

The meeting adjourned and Hara was up and eager to get to his flagship, Japan’s newest carrier, *Taiho*. He had worked the bugs out of the ship in that long Indian Ocean campaign, now it was a lean and well run ship, in good fighting trim, and he intended to do exactly that—fight. They saw General Imamura out, and then Yamamoto pulled Hara aside.

“Kong,” he said. “Your mission to Ceylon was superb, and now I put what is left of the fleet in your hands. Be cautious, but realize also that we must kill our enemy, not merely dissuade him from engaging us. Yet we cannot afford more losses. Can you do this? Can you win without losing?”

Hara simply smiled at him, the gleam of battle in his eye. Then he bowed respectfully, and strode out, fixing his officer’s cap firmly on his big round head as he went.

Chapter 18

“**Admiral,**” said Ugaki when the others had departed. “As to the matter of ship production. Do you recall that we asked Nagano to initiate Phase II of the Shadow Fleet program last May?”

“Of course,” said Yamamoto.

“Well, I have recently received a communication from Admiral Nagano, and I am pleased to report that the *Gunreibu* has authorized the release of all Phase II ships presently available.” The *Gunreibu* was the Imperial General Staff of the Navy, led by Admiral Osami Nagano, who also had a seat at the table of the Imperial General Headquarters.

“You are certain of this?”

“Yes sir, they were assembled at Sasebo and Kobe last week, and I am now told they have left Japan to report to our Combined Fleet Headquarters at Truk.”

That raised an eyebrow, for it was the first that Yamamoto had heard of the matter. He had assumed the key components of that building program were at least six months from nearing completion. “You mean to say the ships are ready? I knew they were commissioned, but far from being delivered for operational use. I have not had a single report on this.”

“Because none have been written,” said Ugaki. “I am honored to make this first report to you personally. Given the urgency of the situation, Admiral Nagano has decided that the normal sea trials will be conducted with the ships already registered to the active duty rolls. He has every faith that we can handle the breaking in period in the course of regular operations. They will begin intensive training during the journey south from Japan.”

“I see... You say all the Phase II ships?”

“Except *Shirane* and *Mikasa*. They will still need a few more months fitting out. But we have all the other carrier conversions at sea—this very moment.”

“Empty shells,” said Yamamoto. “Two days ago we were looking for any strike bomber we could find to recover recent losses. What good will these ships do us if they have no planes?”

“That is what I first believed, but Nagano has held Naval air squadrons in reserve for those ships at Sasebo. I am told they will arrive with all air wings

assigned, and at full strength, with the ships fully provisioned.”

That got Yamamoto’s attention. He knew that there were other power centers in the Navy, chiefly around Nagano at the highest levels, and that they could exert a good deal of influence over aircraft production and squadron deployment. He also knew that the trainers had been very busy in the home islands, for new planes were promised, though only a very few ever reached the fleet. When *Taiho* was commissioned, that ship came with the addition of the new D4Y Dive Bomber, and B6M Torpedo Bomber. Hara had very good things to say about their performance in the Indian Ocean. If these new ships all had full air wings....

“What ships have been released?” Yamamoto felt his pulse rise, the unexpected windfall of this moment akin to the feeling he experienced when he first set foot on the destroyer *Takami*.

“Two light escort carriers from the *Gozo* Class Conversion project, *Kaya* and *Kiryu*, then two more from the larger *Kami* Class, *Okami* and *Kitsune*. These are the escort carriers, but the best news of all is that two dragons have put to sea as well. Both the battle carrier conversions have also been delivered to the fleet early, the ships built on the *Kii* Class hulls, *Kinryu* and *Ryujin*. The whole lot are out to sea, and Nagano has included the two new battlecruisers, *Amagi* and *Kagami*, and five of our newest Destroyer Escorts—a full division!”

“This is most heartening news,” said Yamamoto. “You say they all have new planes?”

“One hundred and ninety-eight, to be precise. Many have the new A6M3, Model 22, and there will be many new D4Y Dive Bombers, along with the new Tenzan B6M. It passed carrier acceptance trials last year.”

“Amazing,” said Yamamoto. “Here we were scrounging to dig up any carrier capable strike plane we could get our hands on, and all the while Nagano sat on his nest of eggs, saying nothing. Now he releases the entire Phase II program ships, and without even a whisper to me concerning the matter.”

“I must admit that I interceded on your behalf,” said Ugaki, and Yamamoto heard more in that than he wished. The man was too headstrong at times. What had he said to Nagano? He turned his head.

“Explain.”

“I was able to convince Admiral Nagano of the necessity of maintaining

our advantage in carrier operations. With all these new American ships being deployed, we had to take expedient measures to stay on top. He agreed, but there was one thing he required to sign this order.”

“And what was that?”

“The destroyer,” said Ugaki. “Just a single ship. Nagano wants it to deploy to Yokohama. He wishes to tour the ship himself personally.”

“*Takami*? I gave you specific orders that it was not to be discussed with the Imperial Naval General Staff.”

“Yes, and those orders were obeyed. I made no mention of it at all, but it appears that Admiral Nagano is more resourceful than we thought. He already knew of *Takami*, and requested this personally, and as a condition concerning the orders he has just signed on these Phase II ships.”

Yamamoto took a deep breath. “I suppose this was inevitable,” he said. “The *Kempeitai* have men everywhere. From the moment those first rockets were fired at Davao, it was certain that the existence of this ship would become known. I trust Nagano will be discreet, and I certainly hope he has no ideas about inviting the Emperor aboard that ship!”

“Nagano is a man we can trust,” said Ugaki. “Besides, shouldn’t the Emperor know about *Takami*?”

Yamamoto smiled. “Admiral Ugaki, the two of us have walked that deck, seen all the strange equipment on that ship, watched its rocket weapons fire, and spent hours with its chief officers. And yet we still have difficulty believing such a ship could exist, let alone the story that came with it—that these men come from our own far flung future. How could we ever explain this to the Emperor? If Nagano gets his hands on that ship, then the entire General Headquarters will know about it.”

“I would assume that is already the case.”

“They may have heard the rumors,” said Yamamoto, “or even read reports, but that is one thing—seeing that ship first hand is quite another. They will not understand, and they would certainly not believe the story we were told by Harada and Fukada. What they *will* believe is this—that the ship is a top-secret prototype that has been kept from their knowledge, just as Nagano husbanded the resources of the Shadow Fleet. They will then assume that all these weapons, these radar sets and rockets, are actually in development, and then they will stop at nothing to find out where they are being produced.”

“But this will lead them nowhere,” said Ugaki.

“Precisely, and that creates another enormous problem. They will look for the factories, the warehouses, the designers, but find nothing. Their suspicion will increase with every day that passes, and fingers will be pointed in all directions. Then the Army will learn about all of this, and they will think the Navy has deliberately held back this technology and weaponry.”

“That was inevitable,” said Ugaki. “In fact, I believe it may be well under way. I have learned from this Executive Officer, Fukada, that Nishimura invited them to dine with him when *Takami* arrived at Singapore.”

“That was not wise.”

“Yes, but how could they refuse? Needless to say, our signals intelligence unit intercepted a friendly communication sent to Imperial General Headquarters shortly after that dinner.”

“Then Nishimura is spying for the Army?”

“At the very least. He is Tojo’s rat, and I have little doubt that our Prime Minister has been well informed.”

“Yet he has said nothing, at least not to me.” Yamamoto was deeply concerned about all of this. He shrugged, clearly unhappy. “I will reiterate my order that nothing should be revealed about this ship, or what we have also learned about *Mizuchi*—even if you are asked directly by a man as highly placed as Nagano. Play the ignorant subordinate if you must, but say nothing. Simply refer the inquiry to me. Sooner or later, this will come to the attention of the Emperor, and then all the senior officers will be called to account—including Tojo. Now... Do *you* wish to explain this to His Majesty? If not, learn when and when not to speak!”

Ugaki was silent.

* * *

“It doesn’t make sense,” said Fedorov. He had been huddling with Nikolin and pouring over recent signals intercepts. The Japanese Naval code had been changed, but the considerable computing resources aboard *Kirov* had made short work of it, a feat that would have amazed a man like Joe Rochefort at Station HYPO, or Alan Turing at Bletchley Park. “You are certain of the translations?”

“As far as I can be, sir,” said Nikolin. “I even ran them by Ensign Omi

last night to be sure.

“Golden Dragon...” said Fedorov. “Dragon God...” Those must refer to aircraft carriers. Japanese ship naming conventions are very predictable. The last two dragons were *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, which translate as Flying Dragon and Blue Dragon. Now we have two names on the airwaves that never existed, *Kinryu* and *Ryujin*. Yet my guess is that these must be new aircraft carriers, something this history has spawned that we couldn’t anticipate. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Nothing in the history of the Pacific War has repeated after Pearl Harbor, and even that battle was quite different from the historical attack.”

Karpov overheard their conversation and drifted over. The two men had come to a new understanding after Fedorov’s mission to Ilanskiy in 1908. They had managed to put aside their inherent opposition to one another, and see that together they were much stronger than they could hope to be as adversaries. In fact, Karpov made a direct apology to Fedorov for the missile incident, and the two men shook hands on the matter and put it all behind them. They realized that what was before them was of supreme importance—the war, the strange new unfolding of this history, the prospect of an Axis victory that was still a very real possibility. The winds of war had been shifting, in Russia, North Africa and now in the Pacific as the Americans received new reinforcements and began to hit back. Yet all was still at risk in the swirling gyre of these events.

Winter had fallen on Karpov’s Sakhalin Operation, and the Japanese now had two full divisions in South Karafuto, enforcing a stalemate. The ice now prevented any ship traffic in the Sea of Okhotsk off Okha Harbor, and he could not hope to reinforce his ground troops by simply using his airship fleet. It took five ships on daily runs just to keep the existing forces supplied. So a stalemate had settled over the Sakhalin Front, now buried under the snows of January, 1943. The offensive there could not be renewed until spring, when fresh troops and more artillery could be delivered by sea.

So Karpov had decided to leave the bitter cold of the north and seek the warmer waters of the South Pacific. That was where the war was here, and he went looking to find it. He and Fedorov had considered their options in long discussions—what should they do? How should they apply the considerable but limited power of *Kirov* to the situation now unfolding? There had been no crushing defeat at Midway, and this had allowed Japan to invade Fiji in

Operation FS. Yet Fedorov was quick to answer the same question that Imamura passed on in his discussion with Yamamoto.

“The Japanese are overextended,” he had said. “The operation they concluded in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal was brilliant, and a severe blow to the British Empire, but now they have to sustain those troops. There wasn’t even enough food on Ceylon to feed the local population. Now they will have to run regular convoys from Singapore. And at Fiji, they’ve committed the bulk of all the troops they had in the South Pacific. That needs even more supply runs, that is a problem, now that Halsey is back with those three new *Essex* Class carriers.”

They had considered many alternatives. Should they hover off Japan and interdict convoy traffic south to Truk and Rabaul. “That would get tedious,” Karpov had said. “Besides, I would not waste a Moskit II on a tramp steamer, not unless it was a troop transport and carrying an important reinforcement.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov. “We would have been an excellent commerce raider if we could have replenished our missile inventory. That being impossible, we should look to engage important enemy surface action groups, and carrier task forces.”

“What about *Kazan*?” Karpov had asked. “It vanished in the Atlantic many months ago, and now you say it suddenly reappeared off Murmansk? What is going on here? And why doesn’t this Captain Gromyko answer our hails?”

“That’s a mystery I’d like to get to the bottom of as well,” said Fedorov. “Remember, that boat had an active control rod—otherwise how could it have reappeared here?”

“But it could not be Rod-25,” said Karpov. “Chief Dobrynin has that one all bundled up in the Rad-Safe silo. There could not be two Rod-25s here, could there?”

“That is a very interesting question,” said Fedorov. “*Kazan* vanished during the engagement we fought with the Germans, or so I learned after the fact. I was not there when that occurred. The entire ship had already shifted... elsewhere. Yet I learned from Tovey that it happened when the *Rodney* was sunk. There was an incident, and I think it involved a nuke. For some reason, *Kazan* must have fired it, but I cannot see why. Gromyko has a very cool head in battle.... No offense, sir.”

“None taken, Fedorov. But this is very interesting. Tyrenkov got wind of

that incident, though we never could ascertain exactly what happened.”

“I thought I would learn all of that when I made my rendezvous with *Kazan*,” said Fedorov, “but I was... diverted.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “And how frightening to think that any airship overflying the coordinates of the Tunguska Event might also be diverted. I have told my brother that the entire area is to be considered a no-fly zone. It would be very dangerous if someone inadvertently went back in time through that portal. On the other hand, it is also interesting to know I could do so if I wished.”

“You aren’t seriously contemplating anything like that, are you?”

“Of course not. I have the means of moving in Time right here aboard the ship in Rod-25, and considering that we haven’t been hopping all over the continuum, as in that first loop, this rod is very fresh, and likely very potent. So you see, now I have three ways of moving in time if I choose—the ship, Ilanskiy, and the site of the Tunguska event.” He said nothing of the fact that the Airship *Tunguska* itself also possessed some rather unique properties.

As for Fedorov, he said nothing of the pronouncements of Professor Paul Dorland, or the mysterious keys for the moment. There were secrets that had to be held close, even among allies.

Yet now the two men had a more immediate problem to discuss. Fedorov and Nikolin had discovered that the Japanese Navy had commissioned ships that never existed, and this would become a matter of obvious interest to Karpov.

They had discovered the Shadow Fleet.

Part VII

The Rose

*“He who dares not grasp the thorn
Should never crave the rose.”*

— **Anne Brontë**

Chapter 19

“**Ships** that never were,” said Karpov. “Very interesting. Do we have a fix on their location?”

“Not yet,” said Fedorov. “These were long range intercepts. They were on shortwave when they transmitted, and those signals can propagate a good distance.”

“It’s clear we have no further business up north for a while,” said Karpov. “What course would you recommend?”

“Due south. There’s a 1400-mile gap between the first two Japanese outposts we’ll encounter, Guam and Wake Island. We can go right through the center, and the only planes that might spot us would be very long range seaplanes—flying boats. Frankly, I doubt they even mount regular patrols in that sector.”

“Then make it so,” said Karpov.

“After that, we’ll be approaching the Marshall Islands from the north, and Ponape will be due south of us on that course. That island will probably be lightly held, but a few degrees to starboard is Truk, about 450 miles from Ponape. That is the main operating base of the Japanese Combined fleet. It will have airfields, large anchorages in a protected lagoon that will probably be well used. There will be transports, tankers, and a lot of warships come and go. The fleet headquarters is presently operating from the battleship *Musashi*. That is the sister ship of the vessel we encountered earlier, the *Yamato*.”

“A tough ship,” said Karpov. “Will it be at anchor?”

“Most likely.”

“Carriers?”

“Yes, they use that base to refuel and replenish. There might be a full carrier division there, but we won’t know until we can recon the area. That could be risky, as there will be a lot of naval air patrols originating from that base, and probably a strong fighter presence.”

“Excellent. Then we move on Truk.”

Fedorov raised an eyebrow. His warning had been received with enthusiasm. “You mean to attack that base?”

“Didn’t the Japanese take the war right to the heart of their enemy when they started this? Two can play the game.”

“Yes sir, but it will likely involve some risk. Don’t forget what the Japanese did to the aft battle bridge.”

“Forewarned is forearmed. We were running low on SAMs, if I recall. That won’t be the case for this raid. Was this base ever attacked by the Americans?”

“Not until mid-February of 1944—Operation Hailstone. They simply did not have the power to penetrate that deeply into Japanese held waters through most of 1943. The US wanted to invade Eniwetok in the Marshalls. Any reinforcements and support would have come from Truk, so they wanted to neutralize that base before the invasion. They hit it with five fleet carriers, three light carriers, seven battleships and over 40 other warships—a massive attack. The base was useless after it was over, and it was bypassed as the Americans continued north into the Marianas.”

“We’ll see what we can do now,” said Karpov, eager for battle.

“You plan on expending missile ordnance on ships anchored there?”

“Possibly. Particularly warships. I think we can get close enough for the KA-226 to sneak in and get us some camera footage. We can jam any radar they might have to spot our helo, and it is fairly nimble, and will see any enemy planes long before they could spot it. Let’s go have a look at Truk and see what they have in the cupboard. Then I can make a decision as to what ordnance we might expend. I will say one thing. If this battleship is there, I’m putting a missile on it.”

“*Musashi*? You know a single missile won’t sink it. Look what we threw at *Yamato*. It took a lucky torpedo hit aft to force it to withdraw.”

“Yes, but we’ll certainly shake up the General Headquarters staff, won’t we?” Karpov smiled.

“That will likely be like poking a beehive with a stick. They could have a lot of planes at Truk, and you can bet they’ll get them airborne as soon as we attack.”

“Fair enough. But they’ll have to find us to attack us, and I won’t let a search plane get close enough to see us. This is going to be a good deal easier than you think.”

“There’s one other consideration,” said Fedorov. “These new ships I was telling you about—we think they are already at sea. If that is the case, and

they are deploying to the South Pacific, then they will likely be bound for either Truk or perhaps Rabaul. That's the other big base they have in the Bismarck Archipelago."

"New enemy carriers," said Karpov with a smile. "Mister Fedorov, let's hope they *are* heading for Truk. The more the merrier. It's time we let the Japanese know they can no longer dismiss us as a fringe nuisance on their northern front. I intend to show them I can strike them anywhere, and anytime I choose. The gloves are coming off now, and it's going to be a bare-knuckled fistfight from here on out."

* * *

It was Nabuo Kita on a Mitsubishi F1M float plane out of Maloelap in the Marshalls who started everything. He had been out on a routine patrol to the east, about 180 nautical miles from the island, and was ready to turn for home. His plane had a radius of about 200 nautical miles, and it was always a good idea to leave some fuel in the tank for the landing cycle. He never knew if there might be storms over the island upon his return.

Yet today the weather looked good, with banks of fleecy clouds and other wise clear blue skies. So he made one of those little one man decisions that acted like a match lighting a fuse. He decided to push his plane out that last 20 miles, to the point of no return, and see if anything might be lingering out there in a place they believed was safe from prying eyes.

He was correct, for two American light carriers had been out on their maiden voyage to train off Midway. Now they were ready for combat drills, and gained authorization to approach the Marshalls and conduct routine recon patrols of their own.

Kita was going to run right into them, and make the acquaintance of a new F6F Hellcat that day. He saw it up above, a blue speck descending on him like a hawk diving on its prey. Looking quickly over his shoulder for a place to hide, he finally saw where that plane had come from. There were a series of thin white wakes making a broad letter C turn on the sea, and right in the middle were those aircraft carriers.

With no clouds close enough to hide in, he had two choices. Dive his plane and head for the drink, hoping to save himself and evade that fighter, or instead use those precious few seconds to get on his radio and report this

contact. That was why he was out there, and he had always accepted the potential hazards of his trade. So he took that right hand fork in the road, and began his radio signal. It would be received at his home base, and then passed on to Kwajalein—a small task force approaching the Marshalls, and with two aircraft carriers.

That was the last anyone would hear of Nabuo Kita, but his message would live on after his passing, lighting up the signals traffic airwaves and leaping from one island outpost to another, Kwajalein to Eniwetok to Ponape to Truk, a distance of over 1300 nautical miles. Those two words—American Carriers—immediately got the attention of Combined Fleet HQ Staff aboard *Musashi*. The big battleship was anchored in the main anchorage, its bow pointed at the bustling airfield that sat right on the northwest edge of that small islet.

The problem this message posed was now apparent. While Japan had occupied all the main islands and atolls in the Gilberts and Marshalls, many of those outposts were lightly held. The few aircraft assigned were mostly seaplanes, and a few Squadrons of A5M4 Fighters, the plane the Allies called “Claude.” There were no planes that could bother those carriers at all, which meant that if the Americans were coming to raid the Marshalls, they could feast on those islands at their leisure.

Even at Truk, the only strike capable aircraft based there at that moment was a single squadron of nine C3M2 twin engine Bombers. Called “Nell” by the Americans, they were capable of carrying torpedoes, but those nine planes would not make much of an impression on a carrier task force. What the Japanese needed to do was fight fire with fire, but Admiral Hara had his 3rd Carrier Division at Rabaul, and in fact, it had already moved into the Coral Sea on the mission Yamamoto had authorized to oppose the American landings on Efate.

The only other force capable of intervening was the Shadow Fleet, which was just 50 nautical miles north of Saipan at that moment. While the Japanese did not want this force put into combat so soon, they now had no choice. The Shadow Fleet was ordered to turn southeast to a position 500 miles east of Truk, as the American carriers had been reported as moving south.

In truth, after they got sniffed out, the man in charge had orders to be very cagey and avoid combat as well. He had two carriers to break in, and

inexperienced pilots. It was not that he was faint hearted, for this was one Captain Clifton Sprague, recently transferred in from Naval Air Station Sand Point near Seattle to start drilling for carrier operations. Those that knew him well had come to call him by an odd nickname, because of the errant way he would sometimes walk, heading one direction, then quickly changing his mind and turning elsewhere.

They called him Ziggy.

Sprague had a few newly hatched eggs in *Independence* and *Princeton*, but instead of pressing on into the Marshalls, he turned south for the Gilberts, where he had orders to scout out Makin and Tarawa, and send the photos back to Pearl. The Shadow Fleet would move southeast towards Ponape on a course to intercept, but it was taking them right across the path of another shadow, that of a sea monster they had come to call *Mizuchi*.

* * *

Admiral Chuichi Nagumo stood on the bridge of the battle carrier *Ryujin*, watching the planes being spotted for takeoff. Today's drill was being led by Commander Amagai Takahisa, an able man with over 2500 flight hours at the start of the war. He led the strike off the *Hiryu* at Pearl Harbor, then transferred briefly to *Kaga* before being sent home to Japan to a classified assignment. The official orders were that he was to take charge of aircraft carrier flight deck installations for new construction projects. In that capacity, he would soon find himself at the heart of the Shadow Fleet.

Nagumo had also been asked to fly home to Japan after the fleet had returned to Rabaul. He initially believed it had been due to the damage the Americans put on *Kaga* and *Soryu*, but Yamamoto dispelled that notion immediately.

"No, Admiral, there is no shame in what happened. War is war. Thankfully, the damage to both carriers was not serious. Yet Admiral Nagano has asked me for a senior officer with carrier experience. Seeing that Carrier Division 1 will be laid up here at Rabaul for the next several weeks, I ask you to fly home and see to his concerns."

At that time, Yamamoto was not even aware of the advanced state of readiness of the Shadow Fleet vessels. Nagumo was also quite surprised when he arrived at Sasebo and saw the cluster of many small carriers near the

naval dockyard. Where did all these ships come from? He was soon briefed by Nagano and learned the truth, and now he was proud to be leading out this flotilla, and made sure he got the most experienced men he could find. There were many in Japan from the early loss of *Hiryu*, and most had been reassigned to local naval air stations to train new arrivals. Nagumo gathered a handful of the best men he could locate, personally asking Nagano to push through the transfer orders.

So he now had Torpedo Squadron Leader Heita Matsumura off the old *Hiyo*, and also Dive Bomber Squadron Leader Michio Kobayashi, and Fighter Operations Leader Kiyokuma Okajima. That group was here aboard his flagship *Ryujin*, the Dragon Lord. Trailing in its wake was the second battle carrier, *Kinryu*, the Golden Dragon; with the two smaller *Kami* Class escort carriers to port and starboard in the diamond pattern he was sailing. Far ahead, a pair of *Gozo* Class light scout carriers were in the vanguard, *Kaya* and *Kiryu*. The two super cruisers and five new destroyers were in a wide fan forward of his carriers.

The drill went off with expected precision, and in very good time. The orders Nagumo had just received had not been expected. This was to be a simple transfer operation, the inaugural cruise of the Shadow Fleet to Truk, where it would be formally received by Combined Fleet Headquarters, the Captains lining up to make their first deep bow aboard *Musashi*. Then these orders came to divert southeast towards the Gilberts to look for a pair of American carriers that had been snooping around the Marshalls off Marcus Island, and were now believed to be heading south.

The men are certainly ready, thought Nagumo. As for the planes, they look splendid. There will certainly be a few bugs to work out, but the pilots seem very pleased with these new aircraft, and the performance statistics on this new single engine recon plane are unbelievable. The *Saiun* truly gives us eyes at sea to find our enemy. They will soon be put to the test.

He had three of the new long range recon planes aboard each of the two battle carriers. So these were to be the two *Kii* Class Battlecruisers, he thought. I see they left me the two forward turrets, though I have no idea what I will do with them. They should have just removed them and extended the flight deck. In fact, I will recommend this if these ships ever return for a planned fleet upgrade.

Nagumo was a carrier man, and thought it best to leave the big guns to the

battleships. If he ever found himself needing to use those two 15-inch gun turrets against an enemy ship, he simply wasn't doing his job as a carrier commander. They would not fire quick enough, or have the necessary accuracy to engage enemy destroyers, and any battleship he might encounter should be dealt with by his planes before it ever came anywhere near this ship.

The navy simply can't make up its mind, he thought. But behind that was the realization that this conversion must have been ordered just after Pearl Harbor. The *Hiryu* had been hit on the way home by that rocket weapon, just one single rocket, yet it was immolated in a matter of minutes, striking the ship with so many of its aircraft armed and fueled.

Mizuchi, he thought. That monster took down *Hiryu*, and then it beat both *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* to piles of floating scrap metal. Not even the new missile destroyer we have was able to stop it. How could the Siberians have such advanced weaponry? And yet we have them as well. I spoke with Kurita in Japan, and he told me he saw our rockets firing at those of the enemy, and we were finally able to destroy them. If we also have these weapons, why doesn't this *Takami* simply replenish and get after this beast again? And why aren't they installed on any of these new ships? I have 25mm AA guns in abundance, but no rockets. Those five fast destroyers could use them like aerial torpedoes, yet not one rocket graces the deck of any of these ships. Something is very strange about all of this.

Nagumo knew of *Takami*, and he had seen the rocket weapon that hit *Hiryu* with his own eyes. Yet he knew nothing of the real origin of either ship. That was a secret known only to Yamamoto and Ugaki.

Chapter 20

Efate – Code name ROSE

On the 18th of January, the Americans filled the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Yamamoto's carriers when the 1st USMC Parachute Battalion arrived off shore on three fast transports. The French garrison was caught by surprise, and was therefore unable to effectively oppose the landing at Mele Bay, which was bounded on two sides by peninsulas.

While it made a decent anchorage, the Americans knew that they could not simply sail into Mele Bay for these landings, which would expose the transports to shore battery fire from any guns that might be set up on the two peninsulas that framed the bay.

To the northwest, the thicker peninsula was about 4.5 miles wide at the base, and extended about 5.5 miles to the southwest. It rose from shallow coral studded beaches to a flat grassy plain with scattered stands of trees, which were thicker near the shore. At its farthest end was Devil's Point, where there were two small bays no more than a mile wide. The southeast frame of the bay was a much smaller extension of land, no more than a mile and a half wide and a little over three miles long, ending at Pango Point.

The battalion did not want to land at Devil's Point, for it would mean they would have to fight their way along that peninsula before they could reach the main body of the island. Instead they landed on the irregular coastline of the southern Peninsula, between Pango Point and the main settlement of Port Vila. They were able to seize that small peninsula by storm, and the town began right at its base, where they were fighting house to house when the French Garrison was finally turned out to meet them.

This force would have been outnumbered two to one by the two battalions of the French Tonkin Division, so it was never intended to try and seize the island on its own. The main blow would be delivered by the 8th USMC Regiment the following day. With the French defense mustering near Port Vila, it would land at the base of the larger peninsula at the small village of Mangalilu. There was a narrow road that led from that hamlet across the base of the peninsula to Port Vila. There, the main town hugged the southeast

portion of the bay, and right behind it was the airstrip.

The only Japanese forces on the island were a small aviation support detachment, which had been sent to improve that airfield. They had been working to break up coral to strengthen the bed of Vila Field, and had been able to support the arrival of a small squadron of nine Zeroes. Once the landings occurred, they were so close to that field that it could be taken under mortar fire. So the planes all took off, got tangled up with the American CAP from the scout carriers *Shiloh* and *Antietam* that had escorted in the Para Battalion, and then turned away north to Luganville on Espiritu Santo.

There was one other good anchorage in the north called Havana Harbor. The 8th USMC Regiment landing at Mangalilu was going to send one battalion north to seize the harbor, then cut off that thicker peninsula, isolating any gun positions there before attacking Port Vila from the northwest. Yet the French put up a dogged defense, still steaming from the loss of the *Bearn* at the hands of these same to American scout carriers. In fact, Admiral Jean Decoux was there at Efate, and saw the arrival of the fast American landing force as if the Americans were adding insult to injury, and making an attempt to capture him personally. There were no French ships in the bay at that time, and he had been planning to fly to Noumea the following day on a small plane, but those travel plans were now impossible. Flustered and on edge, the Admiral got into a car and fled inland to a plantation site near Pang Pang on the other side of the island.

That afternoon, a squadron of 17 twin engine Nells were sent from Noumea to attempt to strike the American landing ships. But Both *Antietam* and *Shiloh* had twelve fighters each, and they were enough to wreak havoc when the raid was detected on radar. Seven Nells were shot down, with two others damaged, and only four got through to actually make attack runs. They had been using bombs instead of torpedoes, and made an ineffective pass over the anchorage, hitting nothing.

Yet farther north, Admiral Hara's force was approaching the area, intent on trying to frustrate the American landings. With Halsey over 500 miles to the southeast, and heading for Pago Pago, it would be Spruance on the watch, with two groups. The escort carriers *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg* were farthest north, near the small Vanikoro islands, and Spruance had the *Wasp* and *Enterprise* about a hundred miles to the southeast. They were actually heading for Luganville, the other enemy base in the New Hebrides which was

beginning to build up its airfield and post small groups of planes. Spruance had permission to hit that base, but the Japanese found those escort carriers before he could close up on the situation.

Hara had sent a probing attack at the Americans, just 60 planes, with most of them fighters. There were only 10 Vals and 15 Kates in the strike element, but those fighters were enough to sweep the skies over the escort carriers, which had only six or seven planes up each on CAP. The result wasn't pretty, for the pilots had come off the *Tosa*, all experienced aviators out for blood. The Kates were carrying bombs for this strike, which was at fairly long range, and the Japanese were skilled enough to get three hits on the *Gettysburg*, wrecking the small flight deck and starting a bad fire. *Vicksburg* took one hit from a Val, the bomb falling very near the island.

That attack sent a shock wave through the US command structure, and Spruance signaled Captain Sherman on the *Wasp* to turn northwest, put on speed, and prepare to engage enemy carriers. He did not yet know exactly where the enemy was, but had a good guess that they were probably north or west of the Santa Cruz Islands, most likely intending to sneak in and pound Ndeni again when they spotted his picket carriers and landed that sucker punch.

This was a decision that was somewhat impulsive, given that he had only *Wasp* and *Enterprise* at hand. He had no real idea where the enemy was, or in what force, and yet, he was the cop on the beat that hour, and moved to support his comrades as best he could. His only other option would have been to contact Halsey and request support, but the Fighting Admiral was so far away, it could take 18 to 24 hours before he could be on the scene. So this option was tantamount to doing nothing in the mind of Spruance, and he rolled the dice, increasing speed and making ready for battle.

Yet Hara had no intention of lingering where the enemy might expect him. That night, he turned south, and then slightly west, putting on speed and maneuvering to a position where he might be able to hit those American landings at Efate a day or so later. He decided to try and deceive the Americans with a feint attack from the north by land based planes on the morning of the 20th. There was a Squadron of old Ki-30 single engine bombers at Luganville that had taken off to make a run at Efate, but they suffered the same fate as the Nells out of Noumea. The fighters off *Shiloh* and *Antietam* cut them to pieces, killing 13 of 18, though that defense left

them with little ammo and less fuel, which was exactly what Hara intended when he threw a long shot at the area, again with his Kates armed with bombs.

Captain Hansen got the word from radar that another formation of enemy planes had been spotted to the northwest. "Nothing out there but open ocean," he said. "Those won't be from Luganville. Better tell the air crews to turn over those fighters ASAP. Our CAP is thinned down to just three planes."

Those crews would be too late, and the price would be two bombs on *Antietam*. The ship wasn't seriously damaged, but it was hit badly enough to end flight operations while the crews were fighting a fire. So Hara had been fighting like Muhammad Ali, at long range, and he had been able to deliver two stinging jabs to the lighter American carriers, forcing *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg* to withdraw east. Now he delivered this setback to Hansen's smaller group. Spruance was beside himself, and he turned his two fleet carriers due west to close the range, but Hara knew exactly where he was.

The cagey King Kong had maneuvered into the Coral sea, well west of the New Hebrides, and he believed he still had the range to strike his enemy as Spruance rushed west to look for him. This time the strike would be much bigger, nearly 100 planes, with half of them fighters, the remainder being longer range Kates, 26 planes off *Junyo* and *Hiyo*, and then another 18 Jills, the new torpedo bomber he had on the *Taiho*. They were the only strike planes that could go that far, along with the long legged Zero escorts. A scout plane out of Luganville fed that strike the location of Spruance and his carriers, and in they came, hitting at a time when Spruance did not believe his enemy was even close enough to reach him.

The American had 12 fighters up, all F4F Wildcats, and the decks were scrambling another dozen planes on each carrier. The resulting fighter duel saw them get seven enemy Zeroes, and a good number of those torpedo bombers. The B6N Jills were out in front, and they got the worst of it, with six of the 18 shot down, and another seven damaged. Yet of the five planes that got through to make their attack run three would put their torpedoes right into the guts of the *Wasp*.

Then the larger body of Kates arrived, with 11 of the 26 planes getting down to make clear attack runs at the American ships. Those B6Ns had the range to haul their torpedoes, over 1600 nautical miles endurance as

compared to only 1075 miles for the B5N Kates. So the Kates were again carrying bombs, but they would be very good that day. Three would rock the *Wasp*, adding smoke and deck fires to the flooding caused by those torpedo hits. Only one bomb would strike *Enterprise*, and that did not cause serious damage.

Yet when it was over, Spruance knew his game was over as well. He had gambled that he could intervene and challenge his enemy, but the presence of those land based search assets on Luganville had given Hara the read edge. He informed Halsey that he had been bushwhacked, with *Wasp* badly damaged, most of her remaining planes diverted to Ndeni or his own ship.

“Get out of there!” said Halsey, hopping mad. “Some sly son-of-a-bitch is out there fighting from arm’s length. The only way we can get after him is to close the range and get inside. I’m coming about to get back in this thing. You get *Enterprise* down near Efate at once. They want to hit the transports there, so that’s where I’m taking my group. Join me by 09:00 tomorrow.”

Halsey wanted to put one more face card in his hand by adding the *Enterprise* to his task force, then he believed he would have the cards to go raging after the Japanese, just as he had stopped their 1st Carrier Division earlier. The stricken *Wasp* was given a destroyer escort and ordered to Suva, limping along at just 8 knots, a thick column of smoke clearly marking her position. If Hara had come east, he could have finished the ship off easily, but instead he went further south, behind New Caledonia, eventually spotted by planes off *Shiloh* and *Antietam*. They were still bravely standing watch over that fleet of eight APDs offloading the 8th Marine Regiment at Efate.

Hansen would have been better off to simply withdraw, because the punch that Hara would now throw at Efate was simply too much for those light escort carriers to defend against. It was led by 31 Zeroes, more planes than Hansen had between his two carriers, for *Antietam* was already wounded, finally getting temporary flight deck plates down to enable operations again. Halsey was hastening west, but he would not get there in time to prevent what happened next.

Behind those Zeroes came a massive formation of 55 Vals, finally getting into the action with the range to reach the scene. Yet there was a reason Hara had been able to jab so successfully from extreme long range. Yamamoto had given him virtually every torpedo bomber then available in the South Pacific, all the planes off *Akagi*, and those of *Kaga* and *Soryu* as well. They were

crowded on the decks of *Tosa* and *Taiho*, their engines sputtering to life and soon taking off to follow the dive bombers in. 88 B5Ns and another 24 B6Ns would come as the main second wave of the attack, and all the planes except the Jills were carrying bombs, intending to pound the American ground troops as well as the transport fleet.

That sent over 160 strike planes in, and 26 of them would put their ordnance on a ship. They were all stationery targets, though the two scout carriers already had up steam and were racing out of Mele Bay, they would not escape. *Shiloh* would take four hits, *Antietam* another five, and neither ship would survive those heavy 1000 pound blows.

In the middle of the battle, Captain Hansen sent out a frantic plea, right in the clear: “*Where is Halsey, we need support! Where is Halsey?*” He was still over 300 miles to the east, steaming at full speed. Four more bombs would hit the cruiser *Saint Louis* before it ended, starting raging fires. A torpedo would also strike cruiser *Cleveland*, and another four fish would sink the AP *Wharton*. Eight more bombs would smash the *Harris* and *Zelin*. This time, however, Hara was just a day late, for all the ground troops had gone over the netting and made it safely ashore that night, though many supplies were lost on those three APDs.

Admiral Hara’s little reign of terror had been a stunning success. He had hit Ndeni, sent *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg* back to friendly ports with damage, found Spruance first and mortally wounded the *Wasp*, then smashed the landing force, sinking two light escort carriers, the brave defenders that had been America’s first light of hope with their little victory escorting the Pensacola Convoy against the French Pacific Fleet. In his mind, he had just avenged the deaths of *Gozo* and *Mezu* when Halsey caught them alone the previous year.

When Admiral Decoux got the news, he grinned ear-to-ear, and took out a bottle of the best wine he could find in the hidden larder at that plantation. He knew his fight here was not over, and it would likely not end well, but he was going to enjoy his last hours in nominal command of the New Hebrides Command while he could.

For his part, Hara now had a sighting report out of Luganville that informed him of Halsey’s rapid approach. Four enemy fleet carriers had been spotted, the new ships that had so bedeviled Nagumo’s 1st Carrier Division. He briefly considered whether he should remain on station and confront

them, then remembered Admiral Yamamoto's eyes as he asked him that last question. "*Kong... now I put what is left of the fleet in your hands. Be cautious, but realize also that we must kill our enemy, not merely dissuade him from engaging us. Yet we cannot afford more losses. Can you do this? Can you win without losing?*"

Hara made his decision. He had already won. Now he would make sure that he would not lose. As soon as his planes were recovered, he gave the order to turn northeast, heading out into the wide deep blue of the Coral Sea under a near full moon. The following morning Halsey's heavy carrier group would reach the vicinity of Efate, but find no enemy to strike.

Hara would meet the oiler *Toho Maru* in the Coral sea to refuel his thirsty destroyers before continuing on to Rabaul. It was one of the most skillful defensive actions of the entire war, for which Hara would receive the grateful thanks of Admiral Yamamoto. The Second Battle of the New Hebrides would be a resounding Japanese victory, putting enough damage on the American fleet to make up for the wounds sustained by *Kaga* and *Soryu*. Most of the pilots that saw the *Wasp* after it was stricken believed it could not survive such damage, but it did, if only for a while.

Sherman put most of his crew over the side picked up by the destroyers while *Alwyn* and *Monaghan* stood ASW watch. Yet they would soon be outfoxed by one of the most successful Japanese submarine commanders of the early war, Commander Matsumura aboard the I-21.

He had scored his first victory against the American oil tanker *Montebello*, sinking that ship just before Christmas off British Columbia. Returning to the South Pacific, the I-21 had the audacity to shell the town of Newcastle north of Sidney, then nailed the USS *Porter* off the Santa Cruz Islands, the SS *Kalingo* east of Sidney, pierced the SS *Iron Knight's* armor near Twofold Bay, and finally sunk the *Starr King* Liberty Ship near Port Macquarie. Cdr Matsumura would go on to racked up 44,000 tons, and now he was going to add two more ships and another 21,000 tons by first putting a torpedo into the Destroyer *Aylwin*, and then putting three more into the *Wasp*, right under the noses of that ASW patrol. The *Monaghan* made a furious counterattack, putting a couple depth charges close enough to rattle the sub and cause a few leaks, but Matsumura smiled, knowing he would evade and live to fight again.

Wasp went down four hours later, and Halsey was incensed. Just as it

seemed he had gotten the advantage on his enemy, the Japanese got up off the deck with this daring and skillful sortie by King Kong Hara. "Damn," he said under his breath to Captain Duncan on the *Essex*. "We thought we had them beat, and then we stuck our hand right into the beehive. It's no surprise we got stung, and losing the *Wasp* was the worst thing that could have happened today. I should have kept Spruance in tight with me, and I let him slip off north to screen the landings. Thank God *Enterprise* took nothing but a scratch on the chin."

"*Vicksburg* is headed for Pearl," said Duncan. "Ziggy had the two CVLs out for a test run and he linked up to escort that ship safely home. But the damage to *Gettysburg* was bad enough to get her looking for any port in a storm. She went to Suva Bay. As for Hansen's group, he's alive, but both of those scout carriers went down in Mele Bay off Efate. All four scout carriers are out of the game."

"A damn shame," said Halsey. "Hansen gave us the first taste of victory in this war. That action he fought against the French did as much for morale back home as Doolittle. Now then... these four *Fleet* Carriers are going to get even. I'm going to pound the French on Efate so hard their heads will spin, and then, for good measure, I'm going down to bust up Noumea. Let's see if the Japanese want to do anything about it."

Halsey would wear that growling frown for days after, particularly when that plaintive radio call Hansen sent out hit the newspapers. He was mad about it ever after, and he would do exactly what he claimed to Efate and Noumea.

Nimitz would say he got overconfident after driving off Yamamoto and beating up the enemy 1st Carrier division. "Look what they did," he said later. "They just got those ships to safe harbor at Rabaul, then ponied up and came right back at us. You didn't think they'd let us just take Efate without a fight, did you?"

"Well I gave them one," said Halsey, disgruntled and ill at ease. "Look, I know this looks bad, but when I took those two fleet carriers of theirs out of active service, that was deck and hangar space for nearly 160 planes. Alright, Spruance lost the *Wasp*. He went in thinking this was probably light carriers sniping at the *Vicksburg* group. At least we saved both those ships."

"*Getty* might be down for at least two months," said Nimitz. "*Vicksburg* just a couple weeks. But with *Wasp*, we lost carrier capacity for at least 90

planes, two dozen more with Hansen's group, and four dozen more on those escort carriers while they're laid up. So there's 160 planes we won't be hauling to sea."

"Then call it a draw," said Halsey. "But just you let me get at them for a rematch. You'll see."

Halsey was going to get that fight, and sooner than he thought.

Chapter 21

He was a man that exuded confidence, with a quick mind, equally sharp sense of humor, and eyes that glittered when he spoke. Those same eyes, and a steadiness of hand and nerve, had made him a champion marksman with both the rifle and pistol from the early age of just 16. Ten years later he would step onto the battleship *New Hampshire* in 1914, and lead a company of US Marines ashore at Vera Cruz, and his men were not welcome, taking sniper fire almost immediately. He sat himself down with a rifle, surveyed the distant rooftops, and within five minutes he had dispatched three enemy snipers, clearing the way for his troops to advance. Six years later that same sharpshooting skill would see him take home five gold medals in the 1920 Olympics, but not once would any man ever hear him brag about them.

His boots seemed to stick to that battleship the first time he set foot on the *New Hampshire*, and soon he found himself working his way up the ranks, from destroyers to cruisers, until he landed as the Executive Officer of the battleship *Pennsylvania*. Now he could practice that straight shooting with those big 14-inch guns, and naval gunnery became his new love. So when Nimitz decided he wanted to move Fletcher back to help square away the new carriers scheduled to arrive at Pearl, he looked around for someone to take over his battleship squadron, and found the perfect man for the job.

Now a Vice Admiral and assistant to his Chief of Staff, the man he picked was Willis Augustus Lee, a descendant of the famous Confederate General Robert E. Lee. He had always loved the Pacific, and Asia and China were a personal fascination for him. So with a famous last name that sounded Chinese, the men came to simply call him “Ching.” Now he was planting his flag on the USS *Washington*, Battleship Division 6, one of the three fast battleships that had moved to Pago Pago in Mid-1942 to support operations in defense of the Fijis. Lee’s division was getting new orders that day, and a new member of the club as well.

The latest arrival, heaving to at Tongatapu, was the USS *Indiana*, a *South Dakota* Class battleship that would square off his division with the thunder of its nine 16-inch Guns. Ching had those two ships, along with *North Carolina* and *Washington*, a total of 36 big guns at his disposal. It would not be long

before he would get the chance to use them.

It was MacArthur that started things, restless, demanding, impatient, still sitting in Brisbane reading about the war through typed message transcripts. Krueger was doing all the fighting on Fiji, and Big Mac had been pondering how and when to reinforce him, waiting on Halsey to clear out the waters around the islands and provide him with adequate cover. It was 1500 nautical miles from Brisbane to Suva by the most direct route, but that was cut right in the middle by the sword like island of New Caledonia. The Japanese outpost at Noumea was right at the half way mark, and with enemy planes based there, the convoy would have to detour well south, extending the sea journey to nearly 2000 nautical miles. Since many of the transports available to lift the division had a top speed of just 12 knots, that was at least a full week at sea.

MacArthur wasn't happy. There were no more than a few destroyers and the cruiser *Chester* to serve as escorts, and he began bawling that the Navy was dropping the ball again. In justifiable anger, Halsey moved to a position midway between Efate and Noumea, and let both ports have it. The French battalions on Efate got a bruising, and then he ripped into the harbor at Noumea, shaking things up there so badly that Yamamoto ordered most of the idle transport and capital ships to move into the Coral Sea and attempt to avoid another such attack. Halsey could have stayed there and raised hell, effectively neutralizing Noumea with the remaining power of his carrier air wings, but MacArthur had other ideas.

"We ought to simply take the place," he said. "We would be seven days at sea to move the 41st Division to Fiji, and I'm not entirely sure it will be needed there now. Krueger is pushing the Japanese very hard, so I still believe we should direct our next blow right at Noumea."

"Well and good," said Nimitz. "But we're still fighting on Efate with the French, and the Japanese have been moving in more air power through Tulagi to Luganville on Espiritu Santo. They also landed troops on Ndeni at Malo Bay and took the airfield at Matamotu, so it's clear they aren't going to take our invasion at Efate lying down. They could mount a counterattack there at any time, which means Halsey has to keep carriers close by to cover them and prevent that. Now you suggest we mount an entirely new amphibious operation? We had planned to move that division to Suva on cargo ships at Brisbane, not APs. And there are still enemy planes at Noumea."

“Halsey rattled them up a few days ago. Have him do that again. Don’t you see? He’s in the perfect position to cover my move to Noumea right now.”

“You realize we just got taken to the cleaners by the *Kido Butai*? We lost the *Wasp*, along with two small scout carriers. And both CVEs we had in theater are now heading pierside for repairs. That leaves us Halsey’s group, four fleet carriers, unless I move a couple more CVEs down from Pearl, and they’re still cutting their teeth in sea trials.”

“Well shouldn’t four fleet carriers be sufficient? The Japanese didn’t seem to want to hang around when Halsey moved on Efate. The Marines should finish up there in a few days. Now’s the time to move on Noumea. Why move the 41st Division 2000 miles to Suva when we can take Noumea with it instead? We’ve already cut it off with the landing at Efate, now it’s time for the main event. Its only 780 nautical miles from Brisbane to Noumea, just three days at sea. We’ve got the division loaded. Why not take it right to the enemy’s main support base. Once we take Noumea, they’ll have no choice but to abandon their position in the Fijis. They’ll be completely overextended.”

“True, but we could find ourselves in the same situation if we don’t plan this well. We’ll need to move Seabees, aviation support and supplies to Efate so we can get those airfields up and running. Trying to do that and also supply a full division on New Caledonia will tax the shipping we have available. We lost three good ships when the Japanese hit the landing site at Mele Bay.”

“Don’t tell me that we have to continue sitting on our thumbs in Brisbane with three divisions because the Navy can’t find adequate shipping.”

“Oh, we could find it,” said Nimitz. “But if we move too hastily it could all end up at the bottom of the Coral Sea.”

It went on like that between them for some time, MacArthur pressing for action, wanting to seize the day and knock out the main Japanese support base threatening Fiji, New Zealand and Australia. When he learned Vice Admiral Lee would now have four fast battleships, he was even more encouraged.

“Lee could stand off Noumea under Halsey’s air cover and pound the Japanese garrison to dust.”

“For a few days, then we’d have to pull them to replenish all that ammo. I

need their flak defense for my carriers, so that creates another problem. And another thing—since when is the 41st Division trained to make an opposed landing assault from the sea? That’s work for our Marines.”

“Where are they then? Perhaps if you had left them on Viti Levu, we’d have the place by now.”

“1st Marine Division needed R&R, but we’ve still got them in the bullpen. In fact, we were planning to send another regiment to Efate along with those Seabees, and we’ve been looking over Luganville.”

“On Espiritu Santo? Why would you put good assault troops in there when we could take Noumea?”

“Because it puts a choke hold on the Japs in both that place and Fiji. It also gives us a perfect springboard into the Solomons.”

MacArthur shook his head. “You can’t be serious about that. You want to fight your way, one jungle ridden island after another through the Solomons? We could bypass the whole lot after we take Noumea, and then I could take back Port Moresby and start planning the push into New Britain. Rabaul is the key. After we take that, all their positions in the Solomons will fall like rotten fruit. It’s their main supply base, aside from Truk.”

“That’s what we believed, but HYPO has been picking up a hell of a lot of maritime traffic orders, with convoys all heading for the Bismarck Sea.”

“For Rabaul,” said MacArthur.

“Not exactly. The Japanese seem to be going all out to build up a base on the Admiralty Islands—Manus Island to be exact about it. There’s a fine bay at the eastern end near Lombrum, and HYPO picked out an association to the code word Momote. The island fish hooks back west to frame a good bay that can serve as an excellent anchorage. They’re already building a big airfield there.”

“Well I can’t do anything about it at the moment. That’s a little far, even for the few B-17s I still have left. Besides, with Rabaul they really don’t need another base in the Admiralty Islands.”

“We think they have a mind to use that as backup—just in case some crazy old General plans to run them out of Rabaul. From Momote they can hit all of New Britain, and a good segment of the coast of Papua New Guinea, from Wewak in the north and all the way to Finschafen. They already have a good field at Kavieng on New Ireland, and we’ve also picked up some convoy traffic headed for Gasmata on New Britain.”

“Yes, yes, but that campaign is months away.”

“The point I’m trying to make is this—they’ve building a steel wall around the Bismarck Sea. New Britain is the real inner keep of their defense. Port Moresby is just an outlying outpost. They wanted that to get bombers in there and close the Torres Strait—part of their plan to isolate northern Australia.”

“They won’t move on Darwin,” said MacArthur. I can hold northern Australia against anything they might dare to send over. No, they’ve put most of everything they have into Viti Levu in the Fijis. That’s what makes it imperative that we cut that all off, and Noumea is the real support base, not Efate.”

“And after that?”

“Like I said earlier—Port Morseby, and a strong reinforcement for Milne Bay. Then we can knock out their airfields at Lae and other sites on New Guinea, and plan the jump to New Britain.”

“Now you know why they’re building up in the Admiralty Islands. General, do you still propose to fight your way all along the coast of New Guinea?”

“It’s the most direct route back to the Philippines, and from there to Formosa. That campaign cuts off all their occupied territory in the Dutch East Indies, and even isolates Singapore, Malaya, and French Indochina.”

“Yes, but with the bulk of all the Japanese Southern Army in your way. That’s a long, hard slog, any way you look at it. They’ll fight hard for New Guinea, and harder for the Philippines.”

“Admiral, do you still propose to bypass those objectives and go island hopping?”

“From the Gilberts to the Marshalls to the Marianas. They only have a few significant bases we’d need to take, Tarawa, Eniwetok, Peleliu, Saipan and Guam. Once we get that last one back, we’ve also cut everything off, including the Philippines. The idea is to get airfields on those islands so we can start bombing the hell out of them in Tokyo. Jimmy Doolittle was just ringing the doorbell. Soon we’ll have a bomber with much better range and hitting power than your B-17s. That’s what will win this war. Besides, suppose you do spend the next year or two fighting your way to Formosa. That puts you 1300 to 1500 miles from the heartland of Japan. General, we already have an opportunity to set up shop that close to Japan.”

“Where? Guam? Saipan? It could take you a year or more to get there too.”

“No, we already have the place—at least our Ally to the north says so—Sakhalin Island. This Karpov fellow has the whole northern half of the island, and as close to Tokyo as you would be two years from now on Formosa.”

MacArthur took a long drag on his pipe. “Sakhalin Island.” He made a dismissible move of his head. “It’s socked in by low clouds and bad weather 70 percent of the time, and frozen solid right now.”

“But it will thaw. This new bomber will be an all-weather capable aircraft, or so I’m told.”

“Admiral, here we’ve gone and laid out alternate plans for the whole damn war. We can’t look that far ahead, and need to focus on what is right under our noses—Noumea. That’s the place to start. I intend to go directly to the Joint Chief’s with this, even to the President if I have to.”

“I expect that’s where things will end up,” said Nimitz. “Look, I have no objection to running your plan through those channels. I’ll raise it with King when I get back to Pearl, and he can take it right to Marshall.”

“And while the two of them sit around jaw boning about it like we are, the Japanese will be busy reinforcing all these positions in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. We caught them by surprise on Efate. They didn’t expect we would go on the offensive this soon. right now they only have a single regiment on New Caledonia, and we have a chance to take the place by storm. To answer your earlier question, I’ve had the 41st Division training to make an assault like this for the last six months. They’re ready. Now’s the time—at Noumea.”

As would happen more than once in the war, MacArthur would get his way, and the Navy would suffer the consequences. Now, instead of moving north to cover Efate and pound Luganville, Halsey would have to move south to look after those transports out of Brisbane. He let Nimitz know what he thought in no uncertain terms.

“Here I am, right in the middle of a fight with the bully on the block, and someone taps my shoulder and says I have to run off and rescue my sister! This is just plain stupid. We don’t even have Fiji cleared yet. We ought to finish one thing before we do another, particularly after losing all those flight decks a few days ago like we did.”

“It’s MacArthur,” said Nimitz. “King agreed with you, but Mac went

right over his head to the President, and flat out demanded that his operation be given the go ahead. You know what he actually said? ‘If you want me to lead, then someone had better damn well follow.’ Can you believe that?”

“Alright,” said Halsey. “I was going to stay north of Noumea, but now I’ll have to take TF-11 south. If I do go, I’ll want the big boys with me. Those fast battleships are good in tight with my carriers. Who’s riding the stallions this time?”

“With Fletcher moved to Pearl, I was thinking of turning them over to Lee. *Indiana* is arriving at Tongatapu to square off that battleship division.”

“Misery loves company,” said Halsey. “Bring Lee in, but I’ll still want him on a leash as I move south. Something tells me things will get worse before they get better in all of this. I just wish MacArthur wasn’t calling the tune, because I’m the one who’s got to be out there on the dance floor.”

“Pick a rose for your partner,” said Nimitz, “then hold on tight, thorns and all.”

“Yeah? Well, ROSE was the code name for Efate, and it may end up becoming a black rose if we don’t look after it. This business has us working at cross purposes. What’s the code name for Noumea?”

“WHITE POPPY,” said Nimitz.

The irony of that was not lost on either of them, for they already had that rose in hand, and MacArthur wanted something else.

Part VIII

In Flanders Fields

*“In Flanders Fields the Poppies blow,
Between the crosses, row on row...”*

— **LtC. John McCrae**

Chapter 22

They had come a long way from that last night in San Francisco. Sergeant Wilson still remembered getting into a brawl at a bar and throwing a beer bottle at a sailor who was riding him about good old home country, Texas, the Lone Star State. The Navy man was a New Yorker, and kept insisting the only things to ever come out of Texas were steers and queers. Wilson showed him that a good right hand and some muscle behind it came out of Texas that night too, and put that whitecap down for the count.

Yet the sailor wasn't too far off the mark with his jibe, for the Sergeant was one of a very special breed assigned to an odd throwback unit that was supposed to be headed for Fiji to join Patch and the Pacifica Division. It was the 112th Cavalry Regiment, Texas National Guard, one of the few still intended to mount up on real live horse flesh—an oddball Army unit for Pappy Patch and his green quilt on Fiji. Most of the regular Army infantry, thought it odd to have a mounted cavalry unit these days, and so the handle got stuck on the 112th. They were the 'Queers on Steers.'

All they had done up until this point in the war was mount a watch on the Mexican border. Patch had them on Fiji for a time after that long 21-day ride to the South Pacific on the *President Grant*. Wilson remembered how they had tramped up the gangplank in San Francisco in his khaki uniform, trousers tucked into those high black leather boots, saddlebags thrown over the shoulders of the men, who mostly wore their felt hats. They still had the old steel WWI style helmet slung over their backpack, rattling with the traditional cavalry saber, and canteen.

Fully equipped, he thought, but the Army forgot just one thing—the horses. Where were the goddamned horses?

"Don't worry about it," said the Lieutenant at the top of the gangplank when Wilson stepped aboard the ship. "They'll have horses for all of you when you get where you're going."

"Yeah? Where's that?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said the Lieutenant. "Come on, move along. The line's a mile long."

So Wilson was logged in and stepped aboard. Hours later they slipped

under the massive industrial orange steel span of the Golden Gate Bridge, and put out to sea. When they finally arrived in Fiji, they had done a bit of scouting, a little work on the flanks, but it was the infantry that was getting all the real combat duty, and the misery that came with all that glory, hand in glove. Then the 112th got word that they were shipping out again, but no one knew where. Wilson got wind of it, overhearing a couple officers talking about a White Poppy, but nobody seemed to know what that was all about. MacArthur had asked for them personally, and many were now still trying to figure out if that was good news, or bad.

This time the horses would board along with them, and they switched Presidents to the *Samuel Taylor*. Their mounts had come all the way from Australia, a special breed called ‘Whalers,’ because they were born and bred in New South Wales. The men called them the ‘Range Broncos’, and they were an ornery bunch; not cooperative at all, so it took two long weeks on Fiji to simply get them to take a saddle, and let a man mount up. Yet once a Whaler agreed to carry you, he would prove to be a trusty and loyal friend, and a hard worker.

White Poppy was code for Noumea, and that’s where they were headed. The biggest island in the region, it was once the home of an aggressive tribe of 70,000 natives, many prone to cannibalism. It took the French military some time to root that out, though it was said that there were still groups of wild cannibals in the high wooded mountains that ran down the spine of the island, nearly 250 miles long. Now it was home to over 17,000 French civilians, along with an 800-man garrison force, the *Battalion d’infanterie colonial de la Nouvelle-Caledonie*. When the Japanese came, and the island remained under Vichy control in these altered states, the French Colonial Governor in Saigon shipped in one more Battalion of from the Tonkin Division.

The Japanese coveted the island for many reasons, for it was rich in resources, home to 20% of the world’s supply of nickel, and many other strategic metals like chrome, cobalt, iron, manganese, lead, coal and copper, not to mention gold and silver. There were already a thousand Japanese civilian workers on the island when the war started, mostly near the Goro nickel mines in the south, and at the chrome mine near Koumac in the north. Then, while the US was trying to rush troops to that island, the Ichiki Detachment that had once been slated to invade Midway was instead diverted

to Noumea when Operation FS was chosen.

It was as far from a forsaken place like Guadalcanal as one could imagine, with banana plantations, farmland growing tobacco, cotton, maize, and fruits, an active timber industry, fishing resources, and the excellent deep water port at Noumea, the capital. In addition to this plentiful food and relatively mild climate, the island had developed hydroelectric power in the larger towns, a small rail line, good coastal roads, and absolutely no malaria.

That was both good news and bad, for while conditions for the average soldier were far better than they might have been on Guadalcanal, it also meant the enemy would not suffer attrition due to food shortages and disease, factors which had as much to do with the Japanese defeat there as anything else. Like Fiji, it was a place where the two sides could have a long protracted fight, and the unusual elongated shape of the island was going to figure heavily in the strategy of that upcoming battle. The US objectives would be in the south, at Noumea, and the airfield at Tontouta, about 33 miles northwest.

The Port of Noumea on Moselle Bay had three good berths, a solid quay and a facility known as the 'Nickel Dock' where the ore ships could load. It was scaled to handle 24 ships per month, but the bay itself could provide an anchorage for over 80 vessels. The one good airfield at Tontouta was ready to receive military planes, and the Japanese had made small improvements since they occupied the place.

Yet as MacArthur had asserted, the American landings had come as a great surprise. Only one battalion had been at Noumea, the second at Tontouta, and the third at the nickel mines of Goro. The entire 41st Infantry Division was committed to this attack, a force the Japanese could not hope to repulse at the landing sites. The irregular southwest coast of the island was cut by 15 to 20 bays spanning the distance of 35 kilometers between the airfield and harbor. Troops could come ashore in any of them, and it was simply too much ground for the Japanese to cover. So MacArthur was going to get his 41st Division ashore, and then have a very good prospect of seizing his first key objective—Noumea, but it would not end there.

The huge island pointed northwest to the Solomon Sea, and the Japanese could easily land reinforcements in the north, far from the American center of gravity in the south. Once there, they could move down the long coastal road to contest their enemy, and now there would be three battles underway,

forcing both sides to supply three separate garrisons, Fiji, Efate, and New Caledonia. Each side had advantages and disadvantages, and now it would fall to the commanders to sort them out.

The cards were dealt; the game was afoot. MacArthur got his war after all. Now he simply had to win it, and against a battle-hardened enemy who would rather accept death than retreat. He had seen the cruelty of the Japanese on offense. Now he would see how tenaciously they would fight to hold the ground they had taken, and the ugly face of the Pacific war would soon loom over the scene like the sickly smell of burning human flesh being consumed by a flame thrower.

Sergeant Wilson with the 112th Cavalry had no idea where he was going that night, but he would soon find out. The 41st Infantry Division had arrived from Brisbane, the ships approaching Noumea through three openings in the long wall of coral reefs that protected the island, eclipsed in size only by Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Halsey had broken off cruisers *Quincy*, *Minneapolis*, *Chicago* and five destroyers to support the landings, and he had swept the skies over the port area clean by sending over 60 fighters.

The Japanese had only 14 Zeroes on the island, along with 12 Vals, 12 more Nells, six Kates and a number of float planes. This time, Halsey cancelled the planned airfield strike by *Enterprise*, realizing that they would want to take it with as little damage as possible.

What Halsey did not know was that an undetected force was approaching from the northeast of the long island—the Shadow Fleet. That was territory that had been scouted earlier by the light escort carriers, but Hara had dispatched them days ago, and the blind spot that created was now covered with shadow. To make matters worse, Admiral Hara had raced home towards Rabaul, until he received a message indicating something was afoot at Noumea. Only his destroyers were low on fuel, and Yamamoto had wisely moved an oiler along Hara's planned return route. So now King Kong turned about, taking his 3rd Carrier Division south with plans to approach Noumea from the northwest side of the island.

The US carriers had search planes out, but most were looking northeast in the region between New Caledonia and Efate. That was where Halsey had been operating, and where he expected the Japanese would advance if they had any intentions of challenging him after he made his first raid on Noumea. But Ltc Lindsay off the *Enterprise* could smell more in the wind than the

light rain blowing up from the southeast. He was still flying an older Douglas Devastator, but was the first to spot trouble northeast of the island. The signal he sent jangled the nerves of the command staff aboard *Essex*, and Halsey scratched his head.

“Mother of God,” he said. “This can’t be right—six carriers, two battleships, and two large cruisers accompanied by five destroyers? That would be damn near everything they have out here.”

“If it is right,” said Captain Douglas, “then there’s the reason *Wasp* didn’t make it home. They may have combined all their groups into one big formation again.”

“The goddamned *Kido Butai*,” said Halsey. “Well, here we sit with four big fleet carrier decks. Our planes are thinning out a bit, but we still have enough for one good flight. That sighting is too far off to hit at the moment. We should move east. In a few hours, we can come about and get turned into the wind.”

Lindsay had it chapter and verse, there were six carriers on that group sighting, though not a single Japanese fleet carrier was among them. Halsey was also correct in saying the Japanese were coming at him with everything they had—they were. For off to the northwest, emerging from the Coral Sea, the elusive Admiral Hara was creeping up with the real muscle when it came to Japanese carrier power. He had *Akagi*, *Taiho*, *Tosa*, and two light carriers *Junyo* and *Hiyo*. Hara had a lot to consider here, for behind him, in the Coral Sea, a transport group was carrying the 79th Regiment of the 20th Division to reinforce the French on Efate.

Thinking he was long gone to Rabaul, Halsey had no idea he was there. This unexpected turnabout was going to figure heavily in what happened, and it was lack of good intelligence that would decide the day. He had no idea the Shadow Fleet even existed—six carriers, all hybrids, all the ships that Lindsay had spotted and called out in that latest sighting report. So he naturally assumed that Hara had turned, getting the matter half right, but convinced his enemy was east of New Caledonia.

The Admiral was squinting at his nautical charts and deciding what to do. His calipers marched across the chart, their steel legs pacing out the distance in hundreds of miles. He smiled. That sighting report would put the *Kido Butai* too far off to intervene in the upcoming landings. Damn if MacArthur was right with his assessment that they could steal a march on the Japanese

and get into Noumea before they could react.

If I move east now, he thought, I can get into position to block their advance and cover the transports. The prevailing winds were from the south east, and his ships were already turning on the new heading he wanted. It was taking him to a position where he could easily lock horns with the Shadow Fleet, but while he bravely guarded the front door, Hara was already over the back fence and into the yard behind him.

The clever Japanese Admiral had a good idea where Halsey was, for the new addition to the Shadow Fleet, the *Saiun* long range recon planes, had been able to find him as he moved east. The Japanese pilots were elated with this plane, for it could fly higher and faster than anything the American had, and even outrun their fast fighters if threatened. They had spotted four fleet carriers, and so Hara decided to throw out a light attack, probing to make certain of the enemy location. He could see what he thought the Americans were doing, moving to confront Nagumo and the *Shadō Butai*, so he would tap them on the shoulder before they could throw a punch.

As he had done so successfully before, he threw out his longer-range torpedo planes, 32 B5N Kates and 10 of the newer B6N Tenzan “Heavenly Mountain” torpedo bombers, the plane the Allies would call “Jill.” Unfortunately, only 9 Zeroes had drop tanks fueled and ready to accompany them, and they would run into a hailstorm of enemy fighters over the American fleet.

Halsey had split his fighters 30/70, with most assigned to CAP duty to protect his ships, and the others running with his strike wave. He had over 80 planes available for CAP, and they would tear into Hara’s planned sucker punch, getting two Zeroes, 19 Kates and seven of the ten Jills. Only 16 planes survived to get low enough to make their attack runs, and not one scored a hit.

“Hot damn, we broke up that attack and then some,” said Halsey. “But those planes came out of the northwest.” His bristling brows were lost beneath the broad white helmet he wore whenever he was on the weather deck.

“Maybe they were off target and had to correct their approach,” suggested Duncan. “After all, we’ve been moving east for the last few hours, they probably thought we were west of our present position.”

That made perfect sense, and Halsey still had every reason to think these

were all planes off the main body Lindsay had sighted, which was really but a shadow of the *Kido Butai* that morning. Then the radio came alive with the chatter of pilots in the heat of combat. Halsey's strike had found the Shadow Fleet, and his boys were giving them hell.

Nagumo had already sent his own strike southwest to look for the Americans, but he still had 38 Zeros up on defense when Halsey's pilots found him. Thinking he was up against steep odds again, Halsey had thrown everything he had at the enemy, 75 dive bombers and another 32 torpedo bombers escorted by 23 fighters. Then the report he had hoped he would never hear again came in the breathy shouts over that squawk box.

"Rockets! Rockets! What they hell are they throwing at us?"

Halsey looked at Duncan, who had his eyes riveted on the Squawk Box speaker as if he was trying to see through the grill to the battle crackling on the airwaves. "More Rockets." He gave Halsey a sullen look.

"The rumors were dead on," said Halsey. Nimitz had told him that Allied intel had coast watchers at Davao months ago who reported what they believed was a demonstration of a new anti-aircraft rocket being tested by the Japanese. It had also been used against B-17s shortly thereafter, and scuttlebutt had it that the Japanese had used it again up north. Thus far the only other use had been against the planes off *Vicksburg* and *Gettysburg* in that first encounter some weeks ago. Nothing had been seen of the new weapon since January 11th—until now.

Chapter 23

When Otani reported the strike wave coming in, Captain Harada shook his head in dismay. There were 130 enemy planes coming at them, and there he was out on forward picket duty calling out the warning to Nagumo, and with 42 missiles, which included the 12 SM-3s he was holding in reserve. He also had 10 RUM-139 ASROC missiles, but they were no good against planes. Now he had a decision to make. He could fire everything he had, and probably take a good bite out of this strike wave, but that would reduce him from the level of a fighting AA defense destroyer to the lowly realm of an ASW defense and early warning radar picket. Something in him wanted to hold on to his power just a little longer, but he had to do something, or be thought of as a paper tiger.

“Signal Nagumo and tell him we will make a limited air defense strike to attempt to shock the Americans. Then vector in his CAP. Mister Honjo, give me a dozen SM-2s.” That would leave him with 30 missiles, 18 SM-2s and 12 SM-3s. Every time he took a bite out of the enemy, he lost teeth, and unlike the shark that he seemed, there were no serried rows of replacement teeth in reserve.

They would knock down seven Wildcats and five dive bombers, damaging two others. Then the Japanese Zeroes arrived, their white wings painted with those red fireball suns. They swooped in and would damage or drive off another 26 strike planes, but too many would get through. Halsey’s strike wave flew right over *Takami*, ignoring the ship as the forward light cruiser picket it seemed to be. His men wanted to get at those flattops and big battleships, and they did.

Two bombs straddled the light carrier *Kitsune*, causing minor damage and buckling a hull plate aft to start a little flooding. Two more struck her sister ship *Okami*, blasting through the flight deck and causing heavy damage in the hangar area. *Gozo Kiryu* would take three hits; *Gozo Kaya* would be skewered by a single torpedo. Both the battleships also got a lot of attention. *Satsuma* would take four hits, *Hiraga* five, but now the strength and toughness of the new Japanese ships would save the day.

Many of those hits had been on the deck armor, and did not even

penetrate to do any serious damage below decks. One struck the number two turret on *Hiraga*, but it was like throwing an egg at a metal box. The concussion rattled ears and heads, shaking men off their feet, but the heavy turret armor was not penetrated, or even seriously compromised. Two more were side armor hits that did little more than blacken the hull of the ships. In effect, the battleships were simply shrugging off the hits, with some cost in human casualties, but little damage of any significance to the ships.

Neither of the two fast super cruisers were hit, though *Amagi* had to pour on the power and maneuver smartly to avoid the wakes of two torpedoes. Some miles behind the forward body, the last two carriers were covered by low clouds, and so neither *Ryujin* nor *Kinryu* would get a scratch, the Dragon's brood living to fight on another day.

Yet seeing hits for all four of the smaller scout and escort carriers triggered that reflexive impulse in Nagumo to preserve his ships. He had been selected by Yamamoto to return to Japan and lead these ships out into battle for the first time. They were gleaming new, with the fresh camo paint barely dry when he left Japan. Now he saw the inevitable scars of battle blackening the flanks and decks of his prized *Shadō Butai*, and he turned about, immediately ordering the group to withdraw north. Soon he learned that he had been wise to do so. Both of the escort carriers, *Okami* and *Kitsune*, reported their damage was sufficient to require all flight deck operations to be suspended. There would now be 48 planes that could not return to those two decks.

Our own strike must inevitably take losses, he thought grimly. So surviving planes should be able to land on my two bigger battle carriers, and any others can divert to Luganville.

He had thrown 150 planes at his enemy, but they were heading into increasing rain as they proceeded south. Only 46 strike planes with 44 fighters in escort, would find the Americans to deliver the first attack to be made by these new warriors of the *Shadō Butai*. Most of those were the torpedo planes, flying lower and avoiding many of the towering thunderheads that so confounded the dive bombers at 15,000 feet. Only eight D3A Vals and 17 D4Y Judy dive bombers would find the enemy, and the American fighters got all but eight of them. Not a single one would score a hit.

The attack now rested with the torpedo bombers, and it looked like they were going to be cut to pieces. Eight were taken by the enemy fighters, and

six more would fall to flak. So there it was, after nearly a year in the shipyards, the synthesis of steel and sweat and sinew, and after all the planning, training and effort to bring those ships to battle, it was coming down to seven pilots in seven torpedo bombers that would survive the American defense to deliver their ordnance.

Halsey would come to call them the “Magnificent Seven,” counting them as they came in, one by one, flying bravely through the heavy flak.

“My god,” he said to Duncan. “Look at them, steady as a rock. Magnificent, but I wish I could personally shoot every last one.”

He kept his fingers crossed when he saw the torpedoes go into the water, but after observing a hundred practice drills at sea in his time, he knew the Japanese pilots had put their fish in the water with perfect precision. Amazingly, six of those seven torpedoes would find ships, two on *North Carolina*, another on *South Dakota*, two rocking *Essex* and one more on the *Lexington*.

Halsey swore when he saw the tall white splashes rise up with those hits. “Get me damage reports as soon as possible,” he ordered. The news he got back wasn’t good. *South Dakota* had taken only minor damage and flooding, and the ship’s Captain said he could seal it off and remain underway. Being hit twice, he felt lucky when he learned his own flagship had only minor damage, but there was more significant flooding that was going to need a port soon. Her engines were not compromised, but he knew his game was over at that moment, particularly when he got the news on *Lexington*. The single torpedo had ignited an ammo storage area and the flooding was much more severe. She would need to get to the nearest port that could be found, and quickly.

“That does it then,” said Halsey. “We’ll have to split the deck. Make to *Enterprise* and tell Spruance he’s about to have company. I want him to move over here to *Essex* and take the damaged ships safely to Australian ports.”

“You’re transferring your flag?” said Duncan. No Captain ever wanted to see an Admiral blown off his ship like that, even if he didn’t really want to stand in his shadow.

“Hell,” said Halsey. “I’ve still got MacArthur’s transports to cover at Noumea. I’ll take *Enterprise*, *Yorktown*, *North Carolina* and a couple cruisers back west to cover those landings. As for you and Spruance, take *Essex*,

Lexington and the other battleship to Brisbane. If they can control the flooding on *Lexington*, you'd do better at Sydney, but save those ships at any cost. I'll leave the bulk of the destroyers with you."

"Aye sir," said Duncan, a bit crestfallen.

It had come down to those seven pilots on the other side, and Nagumo would later learn that they were all among the handpicked veterans he had selected from the ranks of the men he had first led to Pearl Harbor. The younger pilots had fought bravely, but not with the skill of those Seven Samurai. If those last few planes had been foiled, Halsey would have won a resounding victory. Instead, the bravery and experience of those pilots meant that both sides had been hurt that day, and both forced to withdraw.

The problem Halsey faced now was in thinking his battle was over, while all this time he had been shadow boxing. His real enemy was still out there, still unseen by any search plane, and now Admiral Hara would send 69 dive bombers, 15 torpedo planes escorted by 17 zeroes. If they had found Halsey as he regrouped and started west towards Noumea again, it would have been a heavy blow. As it happened, they were not aimed at him this time. They were out after the American landing at Noumea, hungry for blood.

They came late in the day, flying between the high puffy clouds that were left on the wind like herds of grazing sheep. The storm front had passed north, and was now over Hara's carriers, but his planes had punched through long ago and were over Noumea. There they could see that the Americans had landed at three separate locations.

Noumea sat on an irregular peninsula that jutted about seven miles out to sea on the southwest coast of the island. The harbor was approached through Dumbea Bay, which could also serve as a large anchorage. Dumbea led further north to Gadjai Bay where the coastal road north ran just meters from the shore, and the main harbor entrance on Moselle Bay. A series of small islands sheltered the main harbor there. The largest of these was Nouville Island, about five kilometers long and only a little over a kilometer wide. It acted as a breakwater for the harbor, which it reached for with its narrow tail.

The US did not know how long they would have naval gunfire support, so they had planned to land artillery on that island, which had once housed up to 40,000 prisoners as a penal colony for the French. From there, the guns could command the entire city, while remaining relatively immune from a land based counterattack by the defenders.

Directly across the narrow Moselle Bay was the Nickel smelting works on another spit of land to the north, then the main port area with the Grand Quay, Government House, High Commissioner's Office, Main Barracks for the French Garrison, and Artillery Barracks for the shore gun emplacements. The town also had an electrical plant, waterworks, rail depot, radio station, a cathedral and several churches, library, and a girl's school. A few hotels, the best being the *Hotel du Pacifique*, were on the inland side of the harbor town, and the wide open square called *Place de Cocotiers* was dead center, with expansive grounds, botanical gardens and a rotunda that served as a stage for the military band. A tall statue of the French Admiral Orly stood there, commemorating his victory in the Kanak Rebellion of 1878, putting down tribes the French called cannibals.

Now new conquerors were coming, not cannibals, but the old doughboys that had once come to France to stop the Germans in the last war. The 41st Sunrise Division had shipped out with Pershing, though it did not fight as a cohesive unit in that war, its regiments being parceled out to buttress other divisions on the line. Now the French would have to face the descendants of the men who had fought for them at the Battles of the Aisne, Meuse-Argonne, Chateau Thierry and St. Mihiel. Their names were still on the crosses in France, where LtC. John McCrae had written his famous poem....

*We are the dead: Short days ago,
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved: and now we lie
In Flanders fields!*

A few more would die here as they assaulted the White Poppy, finally realizing where they were after they landed. Considered the best of all the National Guard Divisions, and one of the top three units in the Army, the 41st would give a good account of itself. The heaviest fighting in this part of the landings would fall to the 162nd Regiment, which came in through Moselle Bay, and the smaller harbor approach to the south called the "little entrance."

Troops in this assault would arrive on the APDs, a few fast destroyers that could carry a company each. Their mission was to get in fast and get in close, the men having the benefit of the destroyer's gunfire support as they took to their small rubber boats to make the short trip to the harbor. Coming at night,

they had surprised the French Artillery Garrison, and fire from shore batteries was sporadic and ineffective. Any guns that did range on the landing site quickly became the focus of the destroyer gunfire, which was also blasting away at desultory machinegun fire coming from the edge of the harbor.

It was a daring attack by 1/162nd Battalion, the riskiest part of the operation, but it would succeed in getting the men ashore to begin the fight for the harbor itself. Farther out the 2nd and 3rd Battalions would begin their Ship-to-Shore movement with simple landing boats, there being few LVTs to support the operation. Amazingly, they found all the harbor approaches unmined and lightly defended. The Japanese had rested their defense on the presence of numerous warships in that harbor, and the planes on Tontouta airfield about 25 miles to the northwest, but those planes and ships were largely gone.

Two days earlier, Halsey's raid had hit that anchorage heavily, sinking four of five Japanese APs that had been in Dumbea Bay, and roughing up several destroyers and cruisers. Haguro was hit badly enough to force it to withdraw to Rabaul for repairs, and the Japanese squadron had put to sea, fleeing north to escape further harm.

As for the planes at Tontouta, there had been 24 twin engine Nell bombers, six Kates and 12 Vals, and they were ordered to transfer to Luganville after the attack. Only 14 of Bombers survived to make that trip, and when those planes were transferred, the defense of Noumea rested on the single French Battalion, and 1st Battalion of the Ichiki regiment, which was scattered over a ten to twelve-mile area.

So the Doughboys were going to get ashore that day, moving over the dark waters of Dumbea Bay in their tactical landing boats. The waning gibbous moon was just a little over half full, and it cast a silver sheen over the water, broken by the small dark intrusion of the landing craft. If MacArthur had waited a week, the invaders would have enjoyed the dark of the moon, but this being a first landing by the division, the US actually needed the moonlight to help keep order and prevent chaos in the darkness.

Most would survive the journey to the coast easily enough, the rifle teams leaping ashore on the narrow strand along the waterway known as Anse du Tir. Others were confused by the many small bays to the north that all seemed to look inviting enough, and some wandered into Numbo Bay; others into Dames Bay near the headland that framed the north end of the harbor

area, called Komourou. Company platoons got separated, mixed in with those of another unit, but in the main, most everyone got ashore somewhere and began sorting themselves out under the bawling, throaty urgings of their Sergeants.

Further south, in the area designated “Plum Beach,” the 3rd Battalion of the 162nd would land on the seaward flanks of a high hill dubbed Mount Dore. There were shallow beaches in Plum Bay, with a small tree-studded settlement there. The main mission of this unit was to follow the road inland south and east of Mount Dore, and cut the main road on Route 7 to the south. This was the road that led to the mines at Goro, where full a third of Ichiki’s troops were stationed, many actually helping with the work there.

While the 162nd move to isolate and secure the port itself, it soon found itself in hot firefights with the scattered Japanese defenders. Yet outnumbered three to one, with little help from the feckless French troops, Ichiki’s 1st Battalion was slowly being overcome, one house after another.

Farther north, about 245 miles up the main coastal road, the 163rd Regiment was landing at Anse Longue, or “Long Cove.” Well named, the landing site was the only location suitable for a landing aimed at seizing Tontouta Airfield, which was the real prize objective of the attack. Areas due west and north of the field saw the coastal bays overgrown with boggy mangrove swamps, so much so that one was named “Inaccessible Bay.” The beach at Long Cove was fringed on its seaward edge by rocky coral, but the boats would hit the submerged sandbars before they reached it, and it would be easy enough for the infantry to simply wade ashore. To their great surprise, there was no defense there whatsoever. An amphibious landing was the farthest thing from the minds of the local Japanese garrison, who were posted mostly at or very near the airfield itself, some six miles inland.

To get there, the 163rd would be crossing relatively open ground, rising gently in elevation and presenting no real terrain obstacles beyond the winding course of a few small streams. One battalion veered right toward the small hamlet of St Vincent, its mission being to cut the main road there. The other two battalions assembled in the flat open ground and then headed north towards the airfield. The base itself was screened from on its northern flank by the Tambeo River, a small watercourse no more than 50 feet in average width. To the south, the meandering course of the small La Tamoia River joined the Tambeo before they made their way through thickening mangroves

to the sea. There the river could widen to over 300 feet, and the boggy groves made an attack from that direction impossible.

The only way to take the field would be to first cross the Tamoa River to reach the main road, called Route 1. The road and river then ran roughly parallel to one another, separated by a kilometer of open fields. As the troops approached, they would have scant cover in a few lines of trees gracing the course of small streams. Then they would meet the best organized defense on the island, for Colonel Kiyano Ichiki was at the airfield when the landings began.

Chapter 24

The 2nd Battalion under Major Nobuo Kuramoto was well concentrated to defend the field, with most of the machineguns in the detachment sited as AA emplacements on the edges of the long 3000 foot landing strip. He had four companies under Lieutenants Higuchi, Sawada, Maruyama and Chiba, all up to strength. The battalion was further strengthened by Lt. Komatsu's MG Company, a small gun platoon under 2nd Lt. Hanami, and an engineer company to work on the field under Lieutenant Hideo Goto. In all, there were about 916 officers and men, and this was the same force that had been Ichiki's first echelon when it had landed at Guadalcanal in Fedorov's history.

The reputation of Ichiki's force had been forged over many years of fighting in Manchuria, and it was considered among the very best in the Army. It was a unit fired at the outset with rigid discipline and training, often brutal by American standards. The soldiers themselves endured physical hardships, severe beatings, the clenched fist of a superior officer, or a rifle butt or sword haft being liberally applied for any perceived shortcoming. It was no surprise then that the men forged by that training regimen were a hard hearted and brutal lot themselves.

The Colonel had been chafing for some time, knowing that the Army had placed two full divisions on Viti Levu and believing that his detachment, the first to arrive in this theater, had been overlooked. He wanted to get into the war again, not to sit in garrison duty, with a third of his men working the mines before rotating to a two-week billet in Noumea, and then moving to the Airfield before they repeated that sequence. His men were restless, particularly after the Americans bombed the field, and all the planes were ordered out. The sight of the transports burning in the harbor was most disconcerting. The Colonel took that order very personally, thinking that he and his men had not been able to properly defend the airfield and harbor, but what more could they do?

The Navy had sent only one squadron of the better Type-Zero fighters, and it was said that they were now busy moving new troops to build up forces in the New Hebrides. Rumors were flying like fireflies that the Americans had landed on Efate, which was the reason why all the ships and planes had

been ordered elsewhere. He imagined that they were now busy preparing to attack the Americans, and had no word that any threat to his command was imminent.

So it was with great surprise that Ichiki awoke in the darkness of the early morning to hear the deep boom of heavy gunfire. He knew it was not his own artillery, nor that of the French. This was something bigger, more ominous sounding, and it immediately honed his guard up for battle. The Colonel would soon receive a call from Noumea where Colonel Mizuno had the 1st Battalion. The harbor was being shelled, and the dark silhouettes of many enemy ships could be seen in the bay.

The sudden realization that the war had found him again at last was like a jolt of energy for Ichiki. He rushed out, soon finding his adjutant, Captain Yokichi Togashi, and ordered the battalion to stand to arms. Many of the men thought this was another of the Colonel's surprise training drills, which had seemed endless in spite of their backwaters deployment, but now they could sense there was something more in the air that morning. The sound of battle rode the still airs like a rumble of thunder. The Americans were landing!

Colonel Ichiki resisted the immediate impulse to send his men to the harbor defense, knowing that he was already sitting on the ground the enemy really wanted. So instead he ordered his men to begin strengthening all their defensive positions, and when the troops of the 41st finally began to approach the airfield, they would face a well concentrated defense. The Japanese troops would now be fighting under the eyes of their Regimental Commander, and were burning to get at the Americans once they realized the surprise landings had been carried out before dawn.

"We are not going to the harbor?" asked Captain Togashi. "That is where they are landing!"

"Do not worry, this is what they came for, not the harbor."

"But if they take the city they will have most of our supplies."

"There are two battalions there already."

"The French are useless!"

"True, but Colonel Mizuno is there with them. He will hold the harbor, or die if he should fail. As for us, we must keep this airfield from falling into enemy hands at all cost."

"Then you will just sit here and order the men to dig in?"

"Of course not. I will wait until the Americans come, and then annihilate

them. In the meantime, the men should not be sitting idle. So yes, they will dig in, and shore up the AA gun positions in case more American planes arrive.”

“More American planes...” Togashi shook his head. “Where are our planes now? It was shameful to see them fly off two days ago as they did.”

“I am told they went to Luganville to prepare the counterattack on Efate. That island is much closer to Tulagi, which is now operating as a forward supply base for the New Hebrides.”

“This was supposed to be that base,” said Togashi. “Something tells me the enemy has awakened, like a sleeping dragon that stirs in the dark. How could they still hold Fiji when all of the 38th and 48th Divisions were sent there? How could the Americans fight that battle and yet also attack Efate, and now Noumea?”

“Useless questions,” said Ichiki stoically. “We need only concern ourselves with this moment. We will wait here until the Americans think to advance up Route 1 and take this airfield. Then I will attack and destroy them. How many troops could they have landed? A thousand? Two thousand? We have more than enough men to destroy them if that is the case. Have you sent word to 3rd Battalion?”

“Yes sir. Colonel Goto is already marching to Noumea to join Colonel Mizuno. Are you certain we should not do the same?”

“And leave the airfield undefended? What if they have enough ships to put men ashore to our north?”

“They cannot land there; the mangroves are too thick on the shore.”

“Mangroves? There is a beach just north of Tomo where they could put in a raiding force. Did you not read the report of the raid on Makin Island? We must hold this airfield! Now... Place Higuchi’s Company to watch the north road. Sawada is to move a thousand meters south and establish a picket line astride Route 1. Maruyama will wait here on the line, his men facing south. Chiba will hold his men in reserve. As for the Engineers, they are to take up rifles and await further orders.”

In spite of his urge to move the whole battalion south to Noumea, the Captain heard the sternness of iron in Ichiki’s tone, and knew orders when he heard them.

“Sergeant Nakamoto!”

“Hi!” The Sergeant was the HQ Runner, and always close at hand.

“Order Lieutenant Sawada to move his men out, a thousand meters to the south, and establish an outer defensive line. They will then await further orders.”

After a stiff bow and salute, Sergeant Kiyoshi Nakamoto was off at a run. The Colonel tramped off to look over the defenses of the field. In his mind, it would only be a matter of time before fresh squadrons would arrive. His engineers had been busy repairing the crater damage to the field from two days past. Surely the Army and Navy would not leave him with only a handful of float planes at this strategically vital base. So when the new planes came, he had to be ready.

As for the Americans, they were now finding that even an unopposed landing in the pre-dawn darkness was an invitation to chaos. It would take three hours before the regiment had even one full battalion ashore and got it sorted out. Then the boats would return to the AP transports and start the process over. Much of the equipment for the battalion landed was also still on those transports, and so it would end up taking the Americans all that morning to simply get their men ashore and in reasonable order.

Patrols had been pushed out in the early afternoon, but nothing was seen. It wasn't until 4pm that the ammunition loads, mortar teams and heavy weapons were actually delivered, and the 163rd Regimental commander, Colonel Jens A. Doe, spent most of the day merely getting his men ashore and ordered for battle, but he was grateful for the interval of relative calm, unmolested by the enemy.

Yet landing was one thing, securing the vast span of this island would prove to be quite another. New Caledonia was all of 250 miles long. Carriers positioned south of Noumea could therefore not really control the airspace in the northern segment of the island. While there were no good ports there, it would still be possible for the Japanese to move troops and supplies in on small fast ships, even destroyers. Given the limitations on shipping, it had not been possible to make landings there concurrent with the assault on Noumea, and given the lack of motor transport, Colonel Doe knew they weren't going to get up north any time soon. For now, it would be enough to secure Noumea, root out the French and Japanese units here, and bring in adequate supplies and air support units.

The Japanese would fight hard, that was a given. As for the French garrison, some were not happy about the odd twist of fate that had made

enemies of former friends in this war. They had heard what had happened in Casablanca, and how Germany simply devoured France after Operation Torch. They also knew that all the Colonies of French North Africa were no longer under their control. Some remained bitter about their nation's lot in the war, others looked to the future and decided who they might best ally with in years to come. They had an intense dislike for the stern Colonel Ichiki and his battalions of roughhewn Japanese infantry, and so for many, the arrival of the Americans was seen as a kind of liberation.

This meant the French defense was halfhearted, with many men of the French garrison simply throwing away their arms and melting into the population. The Americans would land to the north and south of the harbor, intending to cut the coastal road in both sectors and isolate Noumea. Only one battalion of Ichiki's Regiment was in the town, and it soon found itself cut off from the rest of the regiment, and faced with the swelling numbers of a full US infantry division.

Yet this battle was only just beginning, and Colonel Doe and the rest of the 41st would soon learn that in a most uncomfortable way. It would be Admiral Hara's planes that would do the most damage, swooping in over the anchorages like malicious dark crows. The bombs came whistling down, blasting the cruisers *Minneapolis*, *Quincy*, and *Chicago*, and putting enough damage on each to force them to retire to Sidney with Spruance. Cargo transports *Largs Bay*, *Esperance Bay*, and *Diomed* were left burning the latter half capsized in the bay. But most of the APDs had been further north and south, escaping harm. The only other ship that was hit was the destroyer *Monaghan*. All in all, Hara's pilots scored 18 hits, all with bombs, but mostly on the ships that had been assigned to attack Noumea Harbor.

Halsey was too late to get fighter cover over the landings, something MacArthur complained about liberally. By the time he did get there, sending waves of blue winged fighters over the scene, Hara had recovered his planes, saw the gathering darkness, and turned away north. He would cover the movement of troops to Luganville now, finishing the deployment of the entire Japanese 20th Infantry Division. One regiment went there, another to Ndeni to take that outpost away from the enemy, and the last to Efate to tussle with the 8th USMC Regiment for control of that island.

As for Sergeant Wilson and the 112th Cavalry, they were still at sea, well south, and intended as a follow up unit for the Noumea landings. Colonel

Julian Cunningham was already briefing his men as to what had happened and where they were really going. Captain Leonard was making the rounds to all Squadron commanders, finding Major Ruppert Johnson (1st Squadron), and telling him the men should get into full kit immediately.

So it was a sleepless night for Wilson and his troopers. The next day they would arrive at Noumea, see the three burning transports, and look warily skyward. All they would see were Halsey's planes. By that time Hara was long gone, and Halsey would stand a stubborn watch with his fighters until all the remaining equipment was safely ashore, and MacArthur calmed down. Strategically, neither side could prevent the other from moving their troops, and a day later the convoy bearing the 112th Cavalry arrived. Soon they were mostly ashore, the last of the Whaler horses being led down the gangplanks. Yet as the men assembled neat the Nickel Dock, the smell of smoke and ash was heavy over the city. They could see fires raging, and still hear the sound of heavy fighting.

In the city itself, the US infantry had surrounded the single battalion the Japanese had there. Rather than surrender, the Japanese set fire to every building they occupied, fixed bayonets, and charged the Americans with their fury. They soon found what so many had learned in the last war, that charging men with bayonets were, in the end, no match for men sitting behind .50 caliber machineguns.

Ichiki's 1st Battalion under Colonel Mizuno died to a man.

When it was over, the first job the 112th would be given was to rig up makeshift sleds from old doors and wall siding, and use them to cart off the dead.

Morgue detail, thought Sergeant Wilson. My god, look at the bodies, ours and theirs. We'll haul them out east of the city and be done with it, but this can't be all the Japs on this island. I'm told the 41st took heavy casualties against this lot. It's going to be tougher here than we thought.

It would be days before Wilson and the rest of his Regiment would get billeted north of Noumea. They were going to be used in the role best suited for cavalry, as advanced scouts in recon operations. Word was that another battalion of Japanese troops had been south and east of Noumea, and the 112th was going to be tasked with getting down there to see what they were up to.

Part IX

Eye of the Storm

“They sicken of the calm who know the storm.”

— Dorothy Parker

Chapter 25

The battle of Mataso Strait

When Vice Admiral Lee heard what happened to two of his battleships he was quite upset. He had been all ready to ease into this new command, setting his flag on the newest arrival, BB-58, *Indiana*. He was excited at the prospect of having a square division with all four of the Navy's newest fast battleships, the best in the fleet until they delivered the *Iowa* class ships.

"Don't worry sir," said the Captain, Aaron Stanton Merrill. "I got the assessment from Port Stanley. *South Dakota* took a hit, but it didn't even penetrate her anti-torpedo bulwark. It was only minor damage and there was no effect to her speed or fighting ability. Halsey cut her loose to join us shortly. *North Carolina* will take another couple weeks, but she'll be ready again soon, good as new. It's just hull plating and some damage to interior compartments on her port side. In the meantime, we've got *Indiana* here, and *Washington*. That's a pretty good one-two punch."

Lee walked to the weather deck, taking in the sweet cool air after the rain. "I heard they put some hurt on the Jap battleships in that carrier group. Sent them packing."

The pilots had claimed several hits, but the shock of seeing rockets taking down the lead elements of the strike was still raging through the fleet like a fire on the foredeck. Lee didn't know what to make of it, but he wasn't worried about it either. You don't hurt a ship like the *Indiana* with a Ack-Ack rocket, no matter how good it was.

"Aye sir," said Merrill. "The Japs took hits alright, but in some ways I wish the flyboys hadn't chased them home. All that does is postpone the day when we get a crack at them. After all, they built the battleships to win this war, didn't they? Look what the Japs went after when they hit Pearl—the battleships. It's time we proved our worth out here."

Merrill was a black shoe Captain to be sure. Some called him Merrill the marauder, but those closer to him simply used the nickname 'Tip,' which had

been a family nickname for the males ever since his great-grandfather fought at the battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. It was no coincidence that the battle was fought in Indiana territory at that time. Merrill had put in a direct request for a posting to the ship named for his state when he learned it was to be commissioned, feeling lucky to be selected.

He had started on the Destroyer *Aylwin* in 1912, then *Williamson* in 1929, before moving up to the Heavy Cruiser *Pensacola*. He was thrilled when they gave him the *Indiana*, though Nimitz was eyeing him for a promotion to Vice Admiral and a full Cruiser Squadron. For now, with so many of the cruisers sustaining damage, particularly off Noumea when Hara raided the landing sites, Merrill would stay on his beloved battleship *Indiana*.

Lee had been cut loose by Halsey and ordered to steam into the waters between the New Hebrides and Fiji, just to make sure the Japanese weren't trying to run any reinforcements or supplies to Nandi. They linked up with *South Dakota* there, then got orders to advance north to Efate to support the 8th Marine Regiment. The Japanese had put in reinforcements, with a full regiment of the 20th Division landing on the north shore of that island. Arriving on fast transports escorted by destroyers at night, they assembled quickly and then made a concerted advance on Port Havana, a small protected bay that had been taken by the Marines before they moved southeast to seize Port Vila. Now the Japanese would take it back to have a place to move in supplies, and that had to be stopped.

It was the last operation Hara's 3rd Carrier Division covered before it turned for Rabaul, its overall mission accomplished. Now Halsey was well to the south, hovering off Noumea to be certain the Japanese could not do any further harm to MacArthur's transports still offloading supplies there. So Lee was out in a fast surface action group, exhilarated to be running free, the spray high over the long swept bow of the ship, clearing skies, and the smell of the recent rain still fresh on the air. The three battleships were accompanied by the AA cruisers *San Juan*, *San Diego*, and the light cruisers *Cleveland* and *Honolulu*. A single destroyer, the *Nicholson*, was out on point, and on the morning of January 31st, it was approaching the small island of Mataso north of Efate, little more than a scrub covered hilly rise in the sea, less than two miles long. It was completely uninhabited, but *Nicholson* was going to put ashore a small team of coast watchers with a cache of supplies to watch Mataso Strait. Before they could do that, they had uninvited company.

Commander John Stuart Keating still had the ship, though this was going to be the first real action he had beyond picking up survivors off a torpedoed Norwegian merchant freighter in the Atlantic. His *Gleaves/Benson* Class destroyer had then been transferred to the Pacific, and the welcome it was about to receive was most unsettling. Executive Officer Lew Markham took the sighting report from the top watch, coming in through the hatch to the weather deck.

“Two tall pagoda style mainmasts at 330. Looks like heavy ships, and from the look of that bow wash they’re coming on fast.”

Nicholson was ten miles ahead of Lee’s main body, so Keating got off a sighting report right away—*sighted, two heavy cruisers, bearing 330, my position, course 065, estimate 28 knots*. They had the course and speed right, but not the ship class. The lead ship coming at them was the new super cruiser *Amagi*, racing through the clear morning swells as she maneuvered to take position ahead of the real heavyweight behind her, battleship *Hiraga*. The US pilots may have been correct when they claimed those hits on the Japanese heavies, but they were tougher ships than they realized.

While both *Hiraga* and *Satsuma* had taken hits, neither one had sustained any serious damage. At least four bombs struck each ship, but the Japanese had been pleased to see that the heavy deck armor had absorbed much of the impact. Older ships like the *Kongo* Class battlecruisers had no more than 60mm deck armor. The *Nagato* had two armored decks combining for about 140mm protection. *Hiraga* was a step up from that, with her two armored decks totaling 200mm. Only *Yamato* was better protected, with 226mm. So here were ships the US thought were damaged and sent home, instead relatively unscathed, undaunted, and looking for a fight. The Japanese had already spotted the US destroyer on their radar, and now *Amagi* opened up on it with her main guns.

Before Commander Keating could give another order, those rounds were already framing his ship with alarming accuracy for a first salvo. Then an explosion aft rocked the boat, and another round hit the side of the ship to penetrate deep within.

Keating didn’t know it yet, but the *Nicholson* had been dealt a near fatal blow. The guns were not those of a typical heavy cruiser at 8 inches, but the new 12.2-inch main battery of the *Amagi* Class. *Nicholson*’s boilers were hit, the white steam hissing out with a wail, scalding three men unlucky enough

to be close at hand. That was going to see her speed fall off dramatically, leaving her to wallow in the sea and take whatever else the Japanese could throw at her, and with little chance of surviving the encounter. The rounds that struck aft had also wrecked her depth charge racks, and two of her four 127mm gun turrets were also out of action with the fires and smoke obscuring all.

Thankfully, Keating was not alone, but he knew he was in a very bad situation now. Behind him, the lead ship in Lee's line was the *Atlanta* Class light AA cruiser *San Juan*. That ship was bristling with sixteen 127mm dual purpose guns, and many more lighter caliber AA weapons.

Captain James Maher saw the dark smoke rising into the clearing skies before he got the sighting report. A battle was underway before they knew one was coming. He gave the order all ahead flank, and came charging to the rescue, not really knowing what the *Nicholson* had encountered until the signalman came in with the report. He was some ten nautical miles from the enemy ships, barely able to make them out in the distance. But off to the northwest, the second *Atlanta* Class CLAA, *San Diego*, was also vectoring in on the action, and now he saw that ship was under fire, barely able to make out the tall sea spray of falling rounds.

Whatever was out there had to be big, with guns large enough to have the range to engage *San Diego*. Maher turned to his signalman and told him to notify Lee. "Tell him we confirm two large capital ships bearing 330, and they just blew the *Nicholson* to hell."

Reports were coming in flurries. Captain Russell Berkey was on the *San Diego*, already in action from the northwest against the *Amagi*, and now both those ships were taking hits. But *Amagi* was in another weight class compared to the US cruisers. *San Diego* and *San Juan* displaced just under 8500 tons, with belt armor no more than 95mm at its thickest point, and only 32mm on the deck and turrets. The *Amagi* was rightfully classed as a light battlecruiser, displacing 12,000 tons, and armed with three triple 12.2-inch main gun turrets. She might even stand with the likes of the older British ships like *Renown* and *Repulse*, and certainly had more throw weight than those ships, even if the British battlecruisers had 15-inch guns.

Amagi was taking hits from the sheer volume of fire being pumped out by *San Diego*, which had lost one of her 127mm turrets, with a second damaged, but still had ten more of those gun tubes in action. But *Amagi* had twice the

armor at 210mm, and she was shrugging off many of those hits. When *San Diego* got walloped, the heavier 12.2-inch shells were doing a great deal of harm, forcing Captain Perry to order a sharp turn to come about and attempt to break off. He realized he was tangling with something more than a heavy cruiser, and at that time, had no knowledge that a ship like the *Amagi* even existed. Few did, for this was the Shadow Fleet.

With *Nicholson* sinking, and *San Diego* beaten off, *Amagi* was about to turn its guns on the *San Juan*, when large caliber rounds began arcing in to stir up large dollops in the sea. Lee had given the order to his lead battleship, *South Dakota*, and she was firing by radar with her two forward main gun turrets. Lee was getting the reports from his lead ship, and now he wanted *San Juan* to turn and disengage.

“Whatever it is,” he said, “the cruisers have no business with it. Does *Washington* have the range yet?”

“Sir, they report no visual contact, but they do have radar.”

“Then tell them to use it and double team that enemy contact with *South Dakota*, we should be in range in a few minutes ourselves.”

Five US ships had now engaged *Amagi*, and all this time she had served to screen off the battleship *Hiraga*, which was following about a mile behind. It was *South Dakota* weighing in that set the battle off in a new direction. Her 16-inch guns had more than enough power to hurt the battlecruiser, and she did. A round struck aft where the 324mm triple torpedo tube was mounted, and set all three off in a massive explosion. The resulting damage and fire aft on *Amagi* had an immediate effect on her speed. She signaled *Hiraga* for a turn to port, intending to try and get out of range of those heavy guns, and this prompted Captain Tomaya on the *Hiraga* to come to 000 north to make room for *Amagi* to maneuver.

That was going to take Tomaya’s ship out of the action temporarily, the heavy smoke put off by *Amagi* serving to mask the enemy ships that were now moving into action. He could see the enemy on radar, but at this point, the Japanese used that system for long range spotting, and not fire control. Yet he was wise enough to know it was not a cruiser that had done this, and signaled to Admiral Kurita aboard *Satsuma* that he now believed two enemy battleships were bearing on the Mataso Strait. He was wrong. There were three enemy battleships, but his radar had not yet picked up the *Indiana*.

Kurita was now steering 045 towards the *Amagi*, and her nine 16-inch

guns were already being trained on *South Dakota*, firing long range at the distant silhouette only now discernable on the horizon. *Hiraga* was making a loop to come about and rejoin the action, and the second battlecruiser, *Kagami*, was following *Satsuma*'s wake, about three miles behind.

The main event was now about to begin. *Amagi* had her way in the overture, sinking the US destroyer and beating up a pair of AA cruisers, but she was overmatched when *South Dakota* struck her that heavy blow. Now the battleships would square off against one another in the first such action of the war.

* * *

Aboard *Satsuma*, Admiral Kurita was eager to get into action, though he was surprised to encounter such a strong enemy force here. He had been detached by Nagumo and ordered to move south to Efate and support the landing of the 79th Regiment of 20th Division. If enemy carriers were spotted by any of his float planes, he was to abort the mission and withdraw north towards Luganville, which was now the principle Japanese air base in the New Hebrides.

The Americans have been operating their battleships with the carriers, he thought. And so when the carriers withdrew, I assumed the battleships would have gone with them. But it now seems that the American Admiral Halsey has read Nagumo's mind. This enemy surface action group can have but one purpose, to attack our beaches in the north of Efate, or to destroy any transports lingering in the bay off Port Havana. *Amagi* has given the enemy a good fight, but now she reports heavy shell damage, and flooding aft. What was Captain Tomoya on *Hiraga* doing all that time? I must get *Satsuma* into action immediately.

He could already see the long guns on the triple 16-inch turrets turning, elevating, ready to fire their next spotting salvos. The range was very long now, too far to expect a hit on the enemy, but at least he could announce his presence, a bold Samurai warrior coming on the scene, and drawing his sword. Up north, he had done nothing but watch helplessly as those incredible rocket weapons flew past his battleships, but there was no sign of that here. The strange AA cruiser, *Takami*, had been ordered to break off and steam to Yokohama, and that, too, was most unusual.

Seconds later the forward turrets fired, the smoke fuming out of the guns, the heavy shells chased by fire and smoke. This weather is only now beginning to clear, and it prevented our float planes from getting up earlier this morning, he thought. So we come like two men with canes, tapping our way forward. Yet our new radar has proved to be very useful....

“Sir, *Hiraga* now reports that *Amagi* is burning badly aft and is nearly dead in the water. She must have severe engine damage.”

It was much worse than that. The American cruisers, with 32 6-inch guns between them, had pummeled the ship from two directions in the intense gun duel. *Amagi* had lost her port side torpedo mount, but before the fires made it impossible, she fired her starboard tubes and put three long lance torpedoes in the water. One would strike the *San Diego*, causing so much hull damage and flooding that the ship could not be saved. But now it appeared that *Amagi* herself was going down at the stern. Her forward turrets were still firing, but she would not likely survive this encounter, having only the satisfaction of taking two enemy ships with her to the bottom of the sea, and damaging a third enough to force it to break off.

It was time for the battleships to settle the matter, but Kurita was beginning to surmise that he was at a considerable disadvantage here. His radar now showed three prominent contacts, all throwing large caliber rounds at his ships. *Kagami* was trailing him, with shorter range guns, so that ship would not get into action until he was already heavily engaged. *Hiraga* was coming about in a very wide loop, but temporarily out of the action as well. *Satsuma* was alone, and facing the wrath of what he believed to be three enemy battleships.

In fact, only two had directed their weapons against his ship, *South Dakota* and *Indiana*. The *Washington* had the range on the battlecruiser *Kagami*, and was directing its fire there. Kurita gave an order to put on all possible speed and come about in 15 degree increments, turning away north. All the while he directed his fire at the *South Dakota*, and as *Kagami* drew closer, it followed suit. Kurita's ship had taken three heavy rounds, and one of his turrets was now reporting damage, its guns silent as the crews fought fires breaking out on the foredeck.

In the course of the engagement, Captain Glen Davis on the *Washington* had stayed right in the wake of *South Dakota*, and so when that ship turned to port, he followed it closely, the two ships steering first through 270, and then

further through 250 southwest. Lee, however, was still steady on at 270 west, and about three miles north of *Washington*. It seemed that the Admiral was about to get himself into a private little war. The action was now at about 10 nautical miles, all of 20,000 plus yards, and Lee was firing by radar. Seeing what the other two battleships were doing, he gave the order to come to 245 and turned his broadside to the enemy.

This maneuver was going to see *Satsuma* slip off to the north, but both *Kagami* and now *Hiraga* were still in the fight, the latter having finally completed the extremely wide loop it made after breaking off from *Amagi*. They directed their guns on *South Dakota*, and *Kagami* scored a number of hits with her smaller 152mm guns that had little effect.

Lee's aim was as true as his sharp shooting that day. As the other two battleships turned south, he could see that both enemy ships still in contact were doubling down on *South Dakota*. He directed *Washington* to take on the battlecruiser, and then went after the last enemy battleship, getting by his count, at least four good hits with his forward main guns. His own ship took several hits, but the damage was not serious.

Ten minutes later, *Hiraga* had followed Kurita north. It had been like two knights jousting, each one denting the other's armor and drawing blood, but neither scoring a fatal blow. Lee had just encountered ships that never were, scratching his head as he tried to discern their identity. As he saw the enemy recede over the horizon, he had the strong feeling that this would not be the last time he would lead his battleships into harm's way, and he was very correct in that assessment.

Chapter 26

Far to the north, at the distant home of the Japanese Combined Fleet, another dark knight was approaching the wide cobalt blue expanse of Chuuk Lagoon. Called Truk in the war, it was a small group of islands, the largest no more than five miles wide, and all surrounded by a ring of coral reefs extending nearly 40 miles across, in roughly the shape of an irregular triangle. Within it were some 820 square miles of lagoon surrounding eleven major islands. It was the calm center of the Japanese war in the Pacific, the eye of the storm. The protective reef had several breaks that permitted the safe passage of ships into the lagoon, where numerous anchorages presented themselves.

In the west, the Plaanu Pass allowed for two ship channels to the north and south of the large island group of Poto, Polle, and Tol. There was also a north pass, one in the south and one to the northeast of the main island, which was Weno, also called Moen, where the largest anchorage lay off its western shore. The principle airfield was also on that island, a busy field nearly 4000 feet long that had over 90 planes, nearly half of them A6M2 Zero fighters for defense and carrier fleet replenishment.

On this day, there were 14 warships in the anchorage, which included the main fleet headquarters aboard the battleship *Musashi*, the light carrier *Zuiho*, six destroyers, a patrol boat and five submarines. At other scattered anchorages, there were five AK cargo ships, the fleet oiler *Notoro*, troopship *Hikawa Maru*, three more fast APDs, a pair of smaller merchantmen and two heavy tankers, one loading to make a scheduled oil delivery to Rabaul.

There were two logistic supply routes leading to the Japanese possessions in the South. One went through Manila, and then into the Dutch East Indies, though ship soften delivered fuel to Momote it the Admiralty Islands and Rabaul as well. The second outer route ran past Iwo Jima, through the Marianas to the Carolines, where Truk sat like a castle at the center of a web of many scattered islands. In effect, Truk was the main defensive base supporting all the Japanese outposts seized in the Marianas, Marshall, and Gilbert Islands, and was the principle rallying point for the Combined Fleet carrier groups before they would sally forth through that coral reef castle wall

and out onto the wide Pacific. It was Japan's Pearl Harbor, and it was about to become the target of an attack every bit as surprising as the one Nagumo had led against the American base.

Kirov had been hastening south, slipping through the Marshall Islands where the Japanese had spotted a lone ship, sending the Shadow Fleet to investigate. Yet their planned intercept never happened. They were too far off the mark, reaching Tarawa when *Kirov* was still about 600 nautical miles to the north approaching Wotje. When *Kirov* moved south to Majuro, the Shadow Fleet, seeing nothing of the lone raider, had moved southeast of Naruru bound for the New Hebrides.

Karpov lingered in the Gilberts for some time, doing some reconnaissance of Jaluit and Tarawa, but seeing little of military interest there. The Japanese had not yet built these distant outposts up, and he did not want to waste valuable ammunition on nascent airfields, seaplanes, and coastal light artillery positions. So as the Shadow Fleet continued south, he turned west for the one place that certainly promised him some worthy targets—Truk.

The only island that had any air search assets that might have spotted him from that direction was Ponape, where six Emily flying boats were operating. He decided to navigate well north of that island, as Fedorov said he did not expect the Japanese to be searching much in that direction. So *Kirov* made a run past the island on the night of the 30th of January, intending to get into missile range by dawn. The sun would rise at 07:12, and the weather didn't matter, only the range.

Karpov's missile selection would determine that range, and he was discussing his options with Fedorov in a pre-dawn meeting on the bridge, eager for battle after the long journey south.

"Our longest range missile is the P-900," he said. "That will have a 300-kilometer range and still hit hard with that 200kg warhead. The only problem is that we have only seven left, and one will be in the number ten silo, reserved for special warheads. The Moskit-II hits a little harder with a bigger warhead, and comes in much faster, but its range is only 120 kilometers. Obviously the closer we get, the better, as any reserve fuel adds to the fire damage that missile can inflict."

"Use that and we'll be well inside air strike radius of virtually any plane they have there," Fedorov warned.

"Have you looked at the helo footage?" They had slipped in the KA-226

earlier that night with long range night vision cameras to have a look at the base.

“A lot of fighters,” said Fedorov. “Those won’t be a problem as I doubt they would use them in any strike role against a lone ship if they find us. But there were a couple dozen planes that matched the profile for the G4M light bomber, the planes the Allies called the Betty. They can carry bombs, and also the Type 91 Torpedo, and we won’t want to let any get close enough to make an attack run. It looks like they also have nine G3M Nells, another torpedo capable plane.”

“You certainly know your history,” said Karpov. “How can you tell them apart in that image?”

“Note the twin tail fins on this plane—those are the Nells. These others are the Betty, with a single fin.”

“Interesting. Well, I intend to catch them on the ground. That airstrip is only 200 feet wide, and we can time the warhead detonation at low altitude, right over those bombers. Anything else you see here that could pose a threat?”

“Just seaplanes. I wouldn’t worry about them. However, there may be strike aircraft on that light carrier. Yet if you want to hit the airfield, and the anchorage as well, how many missiles can we afford to use?”

“That is the question,” said Karpov. “We’ll make our approach well before sunrise, and the ship will run black. If they do have anything up that might spot us, I can easily knock it down. I want to be inside 120 klicks by 06:00. That way we can use any missile in inventory.”

“Why attack at dawn? Why attack in daylight at all. We could do this at night, and remain completely immune to the enemy air threat.”

“Mister Fedorov, we’re already immune. Don’t forget about those S-400s. I understand what you are saying, but I choose to attack at dawn for a reason. It’s what they would do—it’s what they already did at Pearl Harbor. They’ll understand it on that level, and then, when the time is right, I’ll show them the darkness is no impediment to the power I can wield. For the moment, I want them to think I may have limitations—that I may therefore be predictable in terms of warfighting rules that they use themselves. That increases the element of surprise later when I call upon it. Understand?”

Fedorov had no idea that Karpov ever ruminated on this level when he considered his operations. It was as if he was waging a kind of psychological

warfare with his enemy, hoping to shock them, dupe them, and keep them constantly off balance.

“You’ve certainly thought this through,” he said. “You want to wear down your enemy—outwit him, and best him by turning his own assumptions against him at a moment of your choosing.”

“Precisely,” said Karpov. “For one day it won’t be a small island lagoon I stand off with *Kirov* at the edge of battle. One day I will take this ship into the home waters of Japan, and with utter impunity. The lessons I teach here today will be remembered.”

Fedorov narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps,” he said. “But you may find the Japanese of this era to be more stalwart and unmovable than you realize. You talk of these shadowy tactics, but understand that these are the men who saw their empire burning to the ground all around them, quite literally, and still fought on. The US sent B-29 bombers in a single massive night raid on Tokyo. Each plane was capable of delivering 20,000 pounds of bombs—9,000 kilograms, and they were dropping napalm bomblets, jellied gasoline and white phosphorus. Each plane delivered more than the weight of every missile we have, and there were over 330 planes sent. They saw the heart of Tokyo reduced to ashes in a single conflagration that killed at least a hundred thousand people overnight. And that figure may be low. The population density of Tokyo was over 100,000 per square mile, and nearly sixteen square miles burned that night. And still they fought on. They would not surrender. This was six months before Hiroshima. They say that the walls of flame were so high that whole neighborhoods were cut off, tens of thousands trapped in the streets, with nowhere to flee...”

Karpov let him finish, realizing what he was trying to convey.

“And here you stand discussing how you’ll spring a night attack on them one day when they think you need daylight to do so as they might, and you think of this as some kind of winning strategy? You need to realize who these people are. Admiral, know thy enemy.”

“Very dramatic, Fedorov, but you forget that I can trump all those B-29s on any day I choose, and with a single missile. In fact, I was considering the use of just one missile here—the number ten silo on the P-900 system. After all, this is the headquarters of the Combined Fleet, is it not? Imagine the shock value of learning I just vaporized it, all their little ships and planes, and yes, even the mighty *Musashi*. Then again, I may have bigger fish to fry with

those missiles, quite literally, if Japan continues to oppose me. So I choose to take things... incrementally. Don't worry, we'll make this a conventional attack, but we'll also make it one they'll not forget."

Fedorov sighed. He had tried to get Karpov to see things in another light, and he may have communicated something. Yet he could never quite be sure of that. Karpov was Karpov, a convoluted maze of a man, now redoubled back on himself with that doppelganger 'brother' of his out there. He had little doubt that the other version of this man was growing, slowly blooming into the same dark black rose that the Siberian had become.

"As to the threat of enemy reprisals," said Karpov, "as I said, we will hit their airfield first... I think a pair of P-900s should do the job, with high fragmentation warheads. Then we deal with the warships. There weren't many reported, but this big battleship must certainly be targeted."

"*Musashi*," said Fedorov. "Remember, we're talking about 400mm side armor on that ship. Even a Moskit-II will break on it like a bottle of champagne."

"We'll go in top down," said Karpov with a smile.

"Then you're looking at 230mm deck armor, and 250 to 650 on the main gun turrets. The Americans put a 230kg bomb on one, and it didn't even penetrate the turret roof. That's as big as any warhead we'll throw at that ship."

"Yet we'll shake up the command network," Karpov came back. "We might even hit the bridge."

"500mm on the conning tower," said Fedorov. "Oh, they'll know they've been hit, but you would have to put ten missiles on that ship if you want to take it off the roster. It took the Americans 17 direct bomb hits, some 1000 pounds, and then 18 torpedo hits before that ship sank."

"We don't need to do that," said Karpov. "They don't use it for combat operations anyway. Am I correct in that?"

"True."

"Then all I want to do is shock them. It serves the purpose of a gaudy armored tower, nothing more. I simply want to knock heavily at the gate and show them how vulnerable they are."

"That would be like insulting a man instead of really hitting him. You might do better to target these..." Fedorov pointed to one of the still images captured by the recon photos. "Those have to be tankers. Remember the

fascination the Japanese had with battleships at Pearl Harbor. They overlooked the oil tank farm, though they did a little better on that score this time through. Hit those tankers and you do some harm.”

“*Musashi* is a political target,” said Karpov. “We’ll also put a missile on this aircraft carrier, and now that you mention it, the tankers do seem like a good choice as well. I want to let them know that they are completely powerless to stop me. In fact, it’s a shame that there aren’t more aircraft carriers here.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov glibly. “That was what the Japanese said on December 7th.”

An hour before dawn, *Kirov* had crept to within the 120-kilometer range mark of Truk. Fedorov had been correct. Their approach from the northwest was unseen, as most search assets had been assigned patrol arcs to the east and southeast, towards areas known to be frequented by American carriers. Aboard *Musashi*, Rear Admiral Kaoru Arima was at his station on the bridge early that morning, though it would be just one more day where he would sit and review reports, conduct station inspections, and dream about the day he might take his ship out onto the open sea again, and actually face the enemy in battle.

He had served on the *Kongo* as a Lieutenant, and held positions as a gunnery instructor and Naval College Staff officer before receiving his first command on the cruiser *Kumano*. In October of 1940 they gave him the battleship *Hiei*, but just before the war broke out with the United States, he moved to the *Musashi* as its XO in September of 1941. When he was made Captain of that ship nearly a year later, he swelled with pride, even though he realized it would be an administrative post, idling in the anchorage of Truk Lagoon, staring endlessly out at the islands clustered about the ship, never doing anything of consequence.

Just a few months ago, in November of 1942, the do-nothing Captain was promoted to a do-nothing Rear Admiral, but at least the journey here to Truk had been somewhat exciting. The ship had conducted AA gunnery trials, and even completed exercises involving those massive main gun turrets, each one weighing more than a typical Japanese destroyer.

He was staring at them that morning, the sun not yet up, and just the faintest hint of pre-dawn glow in the sky. They had tested those massive guns in conjunction with their new radar set, but Arima found the results

unsatisfactory. A pity that they will probably never fire another round in this war, he thought. There they sit, all that steel, silent castles on my foredeck, each one armed with the largest naval guns ever designed.

Things could be worse, he thought. The ship could be back in home waters at Hashirajima, watching all the cruisers and destroyers come and go, and longing for the sea. It was only Yamamoto's decision to make *Yamato* a real fighting ship that allowed *Musashi* to venture this far from home waters. She was a shadow of her older brother, taking on the duty *Yamato* once had, serving as the floating headquarters of the fleet. I should be proud, he thought, and indeed, I certainly am. This ship is now the official flagship of his majesty, Emperor Hirohito, and his aspect is ever watching me in my stateroom where all the other Admirals and staff officers come and go.

As he was thinking all this, in walked the tall stalwart figure of Captain Keizo Komura, the former commander of the ill-fated cruiser *Chikuma*. Most of the other senior staff officers were either still sleeping, or busy with breakfast in the officer's mess, but Komura was always up early like this, often seen pacing the long forward deck of the ship, restless and ill at ease.

He has good reason to feel so glum, thought Arima. His ship was one of the first to be given the honor of attacking the shadowy enemy raider in the north, *Mizuchi*. He had sortied with the battleship *Mutsu* and a pack of destroyers to sail up the western shore of Kamchatka and destroy the enemy landing sites, but he never got there. Both *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* were attacked by a terrible new weapon, the breath of the fire sea demon, *Mizuchi*.

He had asked Komura about it once, but the man just stared at him with that sallow face and dark narrowed eyes, and so he never mentioned the incident to him again. Now Komura stalked about the ship in the early hours, as if he were a prisoner here. Perhaps he was. He had lost his ship, failed in his mission, and had been summarily consigned to this post, ostensibly as a promotion, though everyone knew that he would probably never be given another combat command again, and now he had to endure the additional insult when the decision was made to suspend repair operations on *Chikuma*, and scrap the ship to provide steel for other carrier conversion projects. He would forever be known as the last Captain of the heavy cruiser *Chikuma*, consumed by fire and flame in the cold waters of the north.

Now it was Arima's turn to learn what Komura already carried in his gut. Something was burning in the purple sky off his starboard bow, rising up and

up, like a shooting star returning to the heavens from whence it came. And then it began to fall again.

Chapter 27

Komura saw it too, his eyes riveted to the scene, widening with the horror of the memories he guarded silently within. Admiral Arima looked at him, seeing the distant glow in the sky reflected from his dark eyes, then stared at it again. What was it, a plane on fire? None of the seaplanes were scheduled to depart before 06:00 hours that morning. Could it be an enemy plane? Nothing had been reported the previous day, though now he realized the waters north and east of the lagoon had not been searched for three days now.

Then he remembered that report he had received, that of a lone ship probing about the edge of the Marshalls like a restless shark. The Shadow Fleet had actually been dispatched to look for it off Tarawa, but found nothing. These thoughts passed in an instant in his mind, his eyes still moving back and forth from Captain Komura to that bright object in the sky, descending, descending, glowing more fiercely as it approached. Then the taut still figure of Komura was suddenly animated. He whirled about, eyes wide.

“Battle stations!” He shouted. “*Mizuchi!*”

Shocked by that word, Arima was on his feet. “What are you saying?” he said, but Komura was pointing with a stiff arm.

“*Mizuchi!*” The nightmare he had endured and carried so silently within for all these months was there again, just as he had seen it before, the star in the sky that fell to the sea, the fiery silent death that would only be heard after it had already struck his ship, for the thing in the sky was now traveling far faster than the roar of its own engines.

Before Arima could say or do another thing, he saw it flash right over the tiny rise of Folo island, streaking right in towards the airstrip on Weno, and still his mind tried to tell him it was a fiery plane attempting a desperate landing there. Then it exploded, the fireball a great sphere right over the airfield, illuminating the squat shapes of the bombers lined up in a tight parking area. Secondary explosions bloomed up from the field, and Arima now realized those were the planes exploding, their wings scored by

thousands of metal fragments, bursting aflame as the gasoline ignited.

“*Mizuchi!*” said Koumura again, and now there were more lights in the sky, the violet dawn faintly illuminating their ghostly passage.

“Battle stations!” Arima shouted at a watchstander and soon the bells were ringing all over the ship. The sound of crewmen rushing to their gun stations was heavy on the decks, and the main hatch to the bridge opened. There stood Admiral Matome Ugaki, frowning, the light from the fires over the airfield reflecting from his bald round head.

“What is happening?” he said sternly.

“We are under attack,” said Arima. “Captain Kumano believes it is the Siberian raider—look, naval rockets!”

“*Mizuchi,*” said Kumano, all that he had been able to speak since he first laid eyes on the light in the sky. Ugaki turned and looked, seeing the thin trails in the sky. Then a second explosion erupted right over the airfield. Men were running. He saw the AA guns turning, training up to face the lights in the sky, and only now could they hear the roar of the engine that brought those first two missiles to this place. How could this be?

The first guns began to fire from *Musashi*, triple 25mm Type 93 AA guns sending hot tracers into the sky at another fast moving rocket, this one low over the sea, its fierce light illuminating the still waters of the lagoon as it raced, smashing right into the carrier *Zuiho*.

Ugaki stared in horror as the terrible orange and yellow fire erupted from the ship. It had come in right on the water, right against the thin side armor of the carrier. He saw great pieces of the flight deck thrown up into the air and now a heavy black smoke poured out of the gaping wound, like the wrathful eruption of a volcano.

There was a moment of silence, even the AA guns stilled as all the men stared in awe at the scene. Then they saw two more lights in the sky, the amber dawn scored by their smoky tails, now glowing yellow as they came. Up they went and down they fell, and all Ugaki could think of was the secret Cherry Blossom project the navy was busy with, for surely these rockets must be piloted, and he now tried to comprehend the steely resolve of the men who were flying them, so terribly fast, riders of doom, thunder gods.

The guns were firing again, but in utter futility, and all through the anchorage tracers were streaking up into the sky from every ship, and some even directed search light upwards, their thin fingers probing the dawn like

the reaching hand of a blind man. In came the first, low over the lagoon as before, only this time it would find one of the service fleet ships anchored close by the headlands of Weno island where it had been taking on fuel the previous day for delivery to Tulagi. The explosion and fire that erupted there was awesome, and now he knew that the rocket had struck the tanker full on. *Kyokuku Maru* was now a raging inferno, the fire and heat heralding the rising sun.

Then the last rocket fell from the sky, coming in low over the sea, as all the others had, only this time Ugaki could see that it was aimed right at *Musashi*. A second later it seemed to leap up, as if the pilot had frantically pulled back on his control stick to avoid crashing into the ship, but that was not the case. It was only the pre-programmed popup maneuver at the end of the terminal run of that Moskit-II, the last to be fired in Karpov's attack.

The Siberian had hit all the key targets he discussed with Fedorov, two P-900s over the airfield exploding right over the parked aircraft and raking them with hot shrapnel and the concussive wave of shock and fire. Half the bombers were on fire now, the explosions from their fuel tanks still erupting when the ships were hit.

Zuiho had been next, a single Moskit-II lancing into her sides, smashing into the hangar deck and exploding with consuming fire. The hit had come in right amidships, between the two elevators fore and aft, and that ship would be put completely out of action again, with flames and heavy smoke. Then the tanker had been hit, the fires there so high and hot that they now illuminated the entire northeast end of the airfield. Karpov wanted the officers and staff of Combined Fleet to have a very good look at what he was doing, a nice little drama as he timed his attack, missile by missile.

Then the final blow struck *Musashi*, the missile hitting the ship right at the base of the conning tower with an impact so heavy that Ugaki was knocked off his feet. Arima reeled in the Captain's chair, Komura barely kept his balance as he lunged for a nearby hand rail. The blast billowed up, the shock shattering one of the viewport windows, the smell of gasoline heavy with the fire that now rose along the high steel tower. Then the heavy smoke rolled up.

The tower walls had not been compromised, just as Fedorov had warned. Their 500mm steel was more than enough to stop that missile, but the fires would blacken them, and the smoke envelop them, obscuring all view of the

lagoon in minutes. Alarms were ringing all over the ship, men were running to the scene, dragging the long fire hoses. Two watchstanders were helping Admiral Ugaki to his feet, and Arima saw a thin trail of blood from a bruise on his forehead.

He looked at Komura with new eyes now, looked with understanding that could only come with the heat and shock and fire of that missile. This was what had happened to his ship, only the cruiser had been hit much worse. Even though he did not yet know the extent of the damage, he knew that this single hit would not send *Musashi* to the scrap yards. But how many more rockets would come.

Now he felt the same feeling that must have yawned within Komura when his ship was attacked, a feeling of complete helplessness. The firing from the AA guns sputtered out, and he walked to the only clear viewports to try and see what was happening below. Komura was there, and the two men glanced at one another, saying nothing.

* * *

“Cease Fire,” said Karpov, arms folded as he stood over Grilikov, who was standing in for Samsonov on this watch, elated to be in charge of his first real combat operation. He had fired the two P-900s, and three Moskit-II missiles, marveling at how the single push of his finger on a small panel switch could send such terrible power out into the world.

“Well done, Mister Grilikov. You will make a fine combat officer at that station.”

Grilikov beamed at Karpov, very content with himself. He had been very nervous before it all began, afraid the Admiral would ask him to do something that Samsonov had not yet explained to him, but it was all so very simple in the end. The target would appear on his screen, a thing he still was utterly fascinated with, the glowing panel a complete mystery to him. But all he had to do was touch it, and then select the switches as Samsonov had shown him. Death and destruction would follow in short order.

“I think that will be sufficient,” Karpov said to Fedorov. “In fact, I do not think we will even need to send up the KA-226 for battle damage assessment. Mister Nikolin...”

“Sir?”

“I want you to closely monitor Japanese fleet radio traffic for the next two hours. Record everything and send it down for translation. I think we’ll be able to ascertain the impact of this strike easily enough from that transcript. I want it on my stateroom desk by 20:00 hours this evening. Now then... What do you think of this little demonstration, Mister Fedorov? We’ve shot our arrows into the eye of the storm. Was it worth the five missiles we expended?”

“You won’t need that transcript to know what happened,” said Fedorov. “I’d bet the P-900s probably took out fifteen or twenty bombers, and shut down that main airstrip, but only for a few hours. They’ll be operational shortly after dawn and have everything they can fly up looking for us.”

Karpov wasn’t concerned about that. He had already come about, and was heading northeast at 28 knots, with the ship at air alert two. He had determined that he would save his S-400s if any enemy planes found the ship, and just use the much more plentiful Klinoks to shoot them down.

“As for the ships,” said Fedorov, “The tanker you hit will be a total loss, and there will be severe fires at the mooring site. That was the most severe blow. You probably consumed ten to twelve thousand tons of fuel with that hit, in addition to taking out a very valuable fleet support asset. The other tanker was out in the main anchorage.”

“We’ll leave it there,” said Karpov. “I won’t waste a missile on an empty ship, but if I catch one at sea I’ll certainly sink such a ship.”

“The carrier is mission killed, which is to say I don’t think we’ll see any of its strike planes launched, to get after us. We’ll know more about that damage from Nikolin’s intercepts. As for Musashi, you’ve already heard me out on that score. You shook them up, and it was rather dramatic to put the last shot on that ship.”

“Oh, that wasn’t the last shot,” said Karpov. “And I’m sure this won’t seem anywhere as traumatic as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but I made my point. I just taught them something here—that I can go anywhere I please, even into the heart of their fleet web here to strike its very center. I intend to fire my next shot off in a signal to that headquarters, acknowledging that it was my ship that inflicted this damage and repeating my demands concerning Vladivostok.”

“That will be ignored,” said Fedorov. “In fact, I think if you had emptied the forward deck and blasted every ship in the anchorage, they would still

ignore such a demand. Remember what I said about Tokyo.”

“They can ignore me at their own peril then,” said Karpov. “This was meant as a demonstration of our capability, nothing more. Now we look for some real targets. I want to find their carriers, and I will tell them that I now intend to find and sink every aircraft carrier they have. They will freeze the blood in their veins. They already have their hands full with everything the Americans can throw at them. To have *Kirov* here, hunting them like an unseen shark, will be most unnerving.”

“But it won’t stop them. It won’t prevent them from operating either,” said Fedorov. “When pressed heavily, the Japanese respond by attacking.”

“And I will respond by destroying anything that come near me. This will be a very good hunting ground in the days ahead. I should have taken the war here long ago, but I had to see that we established a firm hold on Northern Sakhalin. Now we have three full divisions there, and they won’t push us off. It’s also interesting that we’ve not seen or heard anything more of this guided missile destroyer. I had hoped it might be at anchor here.”

“That would have certainly spoiled your show,” said Fedorov.

“Perhaps, but I wonder where the *Takami* is now?”

“The last we were able to discern was that it was with Kurita again. Nikolin says there was a fleet engagement off Efate in the New Hebrides yesterday—a surface action, with no carriers involved.”

“Most likely because the Americans are still fussing about at Noumea. Yet that was a very bold operation, was it not?”

“It was,” said Fedorov. “I don’t think the Japanese expected that so soon. The Americans took losses in those recent carrier duels. In fact, I’d say they were bested again, but they did manage to hold the ground, or rather the sea around the New Hebrides. That was as much due to the need for the Japanese to replenish as anything else, but I’m a little concerned over some of the message traffic we intercepted.”

“How so?”

“It was all in code, but it wasn’t difficult to figure out when they were referring to a carrier. The thing is this: there were far too many references to carriers in that traffic. They appear to have been operating two carrier divisions, and we were able to ID most of the ships in the main body under Admiral Hara. Yet there was another division east of the New Hebrides, and we haven’t been able to determine its composition.”

“Where might it be now?” asked Karpov.

“We’re pretty sure Hara withdrew to Rabaul. So I would guess that other group might be heading for Truk. If we had held off a bit, we might have caught them here.”

“Then we’ll catch them at sea instead,” said Karpov. “Better to sink them in the deep blue than in a shallow lagoon where they might be able to refloat them again.”

“I suppose so,” said Fedorov, “but what I’m getting at is that there seems to be too many Japanese carriers in operation now. I’ve been keeping a close tab on their losses. We had at least six references to carrier capable ships in that eastern group. That’s too many. They’ve got more ships than they should be able to put to sea, and that is a gap in our intelligence that needs to be filled.”

“So we’ll have a look south and east of Truk,” said Karpov.

“There was one code phrase that was translated, and it caught my attention—*Kage Kantai*—shadow fleet. We also intercepted the phrase *Shadō Butai*.”

“Shadow fleet? Interesting. What do you make of that?”

“It could be a reference to a secret building program that resulted in the conversion of several ships to carriers. That’s well documented in the history. In fact, you just hit one of those ships. The *Zuiho* was commissioned as a fast oiler and submarine tender, the *Takasaki*. Its sister ship was the same—tender *Tsurugisaki*, which became the light carrier *Shoho*. The Japanese had a hidden program where they planned to convert fleet auxiliary ships to carriers. Perhaps these unidentified ships could be part of that, though I should be able to track most of these conversions down.”

“You forget this history is quite different now,” said Karpov. “We just wrote another chapter here with this attack on Truk. In any case, that group must be out there somewhere. Let’s see if we can find it.”

Part X

Assassin's Creed

“If they were going to kill you, would they knock?”

— Jeffry Eugenides

Chapter 28

Word of the attack on Truk would spread like the fires ignited by those five missiles. That the enemy could strike them this way, unseen, unchallenged within 120 kilometers of Combined Fleet Headquarters, was most disturbing news to Admiral Yamamoto. He had been at Rabaul wanting to inspect the damage to the *Soryu* and *Kaga* more closely, and was pleased to see that it would be mended very quickly. Then came the news from Truk.

This was undoubtedly *Mizuchi*, he thought. I do not think the Americans are using these rocket weapons yet. Thankfully the damage was not heavy. The airfield is back in operation and they are now searching for this Siberian raider, but *Zuiho* was the only carrier there, and that ship is once again stricken from the active duty roll. It is amazing that they were able to hit targets with such precision, yet the officers from *Takami* warned me of this. Even *Musashi* was struck, but by only one missile. Clearly this was meant to send a message more than any real attempt to sink that ship.

Yet now what to do with the *Shadō Butai*? Their last reported position was still a thousand miles southeast of Truk. I am told the rockets came from the northeast. Should I allow those new carriers to continue north? No... If I permit this, the likelihood that they will be discovered by *Mizuchi* is very high. A pity that *Takami* is well on her way to Manila now, and from there, ordered to Yokohama as a prize Nagano wishes to gloat over in exchange for releasing all these new ships early. I could use that ship's radars and missile defense shield now. If it were here, I would consider sending it to join the *Shadō Butai* to challenge *Mizuchi*, but now I think prudence demands that I order that carrier division west into the Solomon Sea.

Yes... The islands have a lot of sea planes that we can get up to provide us with a means of detecting this enemy. In the Solomons, the *Shadō Butai* will be alerted to any danger well before those rockets can find them. And they will also be close enough for us to support them with Hara's group. He performed miracles on that last sortie, delivering a stunning performance. He put several enemy carriers out of action, and even sunk one of their fleet carriers. Admiral Halsey charged in like a mad bull after that, and drove off the *Shadō Butai*, but he did not seriously harm us. Hara was like a ghost. The

enemy never discovered him, and he successfully covered the movement of all three regiments of the reserve 20th Division to the New Hebrides and Santa Cruz Islands.

Our battleships took the brunt of the American attack, and yet I am told *Satsuma* and *Hiraga* shrugged off the enemy bombs, which was very heartening news. A pity we lost one of the new super heavy cruisers in the surface action that followed, but I must also congratulate Kurita, for he faced three battleships and drove them off. They were undoubtedly coming to bombard our positions on Efate, but the latest reports had them moving east towards Pago Pago.

Yet now the question of how to face *Mizuchi* looms darkly in my mind. What if that ship is bold enough to come here, to Rabaul? This bay has really been the heart of our operations, being much closer to Noumea and the Fijis. All our remaining fleet carriers are here now. Had that ship attacked this harbor, it may have been a disaster for us worse than that inflicted on the Americans at Pearl Harbor.

So how do I fight this demon? Do I sortie with all these ships, and give battle? Do I attempt to overwhelm it with the full might of our navy, or do I disperse the fleet into smaller divisions, perhaps moving into the Coral Sea to interdict enemy communications with their bold operation against Noumea? *Soryu* will be available again in a matter of days; *Kaga* just a week later. Yet that is more than enough time for *Mizuchi* to navigate to these waters. It could strike both those vital ships while they are pierside for repairs here. I cannot permit that to happen, so I must find some way of luring my enemy into battle far from Rabaul.

We still have *Akagi*, *Tosa*, *Taiho* and the two light carriers *Junyo* and *Hiyo*. Admiral Nagumo reports he still has capability with his two dragons, *Kinryu* and *Ryujin*. Would that be enough force to face and defeat *Mizuchi*? How many ships might be sacrificed if I order this? We have an oiler very close to Nagumo's position. What if I order him to replenish at sea, and then stand off the Solomons? I could then move Hara into position behind Bougainville Island, or even Choiseul. In effect, the *Shadō Butai* would be my bait, and if *Mizuchi* attacks Nagumo, then Hara can counterattack with everything he has, like an archer hidden behind the wall of those islands.

We have planes at Buka and Buin on Bougainville, seaplanes in the Shortlands, and at Tulagi. Surely we can ascertain where this ship is if it

approaches Nagumo. And he has the new long range *Saiun* recon plane aboard his carriers, the Nakajima C6N. So yes, we will find *Mizuchi* if he comes, and then I will order Nagumo to engage. Even as his planes start on their way, Hara must begin launching from behind Bougainville, and we can also throw up all the land based bombers we have here at Rabaul.

Yet they are very clever. They may have means of finding Hara that I do not know of, and I must not allow them to attack our prized fleet carriers. So I will order Kong to use a much different deployment. He will break up the *Kido Butai*, and position our carriers all along the 150-mile length of Bougainville. They will stand like archers behind that wall, and this way, even if the enemy suspects their location when they see his planes coming, they will still not be able to hurt Hara's carriers as they might if we operated in one heavy carrier division.

Yamamoto smiled. I will use all our strength, and yet it will be dispersed like the wind. When our planes launch they will be like a vast storm front, and yet there will be no central point the enemy can find to strike back at us, no eye in the storm. Yes... This is how we must fight, and we must do so immediately, before the Americans replenish and repair their losses, and Admiral Halsey sorties again.

He decided.

* * *

General Imamura leaned close to his confederate, General Hyakutake, as if confiding some great secret, and that was not very far from the truth. The information he was now disclosing was known only to a very few within Imperial General Headquarters.

"The Army will be instructed, in fact it will be ordered, to abandon all territory presently occupied in China south of the Yellow River. Only Shanghai, Canton and Hong Kong will be excepted." Imamura lowered his voice to a whisper as he said this, though he knew the two men were quite alone, and there was no chance anything of their discussion could be overheard.

"Understand what this means," he said. "The Army will soon have many more divisions available for deployment elsewhere. They are to withdraw all of the 11th, 12th, and 13th Armies from territory south of the Yellow River, 15 divisions. Many of these will be redeployed to the Siberian Front, but at

least a third are to be made available to the South Pacific Army Group immediately. Look here... I received this coded message only yesterday.” Imamura handed General Hyakutake a message transcript, yet it contained only one cryptic phrase: *The warrior is lucky, for the moon shines bright, and the hour of the festival has come.*

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

“Do you see what I see in this?” asked Hyakutake.

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

He smiled, very pleased with himself, and all he had come to learn through means he would not discuss. He had many contacts in the Army web, chief among them being the irascible General Nishimura at Singapore. Together the two men had shared a growing curiosity about the strange ship that had appeared, the *Takami*, and the men who commanded it. They learned Ivan Volkov was also very interested in that ship, and that he had come to Japan to learn more about it, and to make the unprecedented request for an audience with Emperor Hirohito. Whatever else was discussed the “Yellow River Accord” as it was soon to be called, was going to change the face of the battle in the Pacific War. Japan was consolidating and limiting its position and operations in China, and the Army was looking more and more to securing the resources they had seized in those halcyon first six months of the war in the South Pacific.

Strangely, four of the five divisions Imamura had mentioned did eventually find their way to the Pacific Theater. Only the powerful 3rd Division had remained in China throughout the war, but now it was coming south. This could not help but have a dramatic effect on the campaign now

underway.

* * *

The Americans had just transitioned from the strategic defensive to their first real offensive operations on both land and sea, and Halsey had learned that it wasn't enough to simply operate against the Japanese carriers. Now he also had to cover the movement of troops and supplies to contested islands, and the Japanese had this same consideration to take into their planning.

As January ended, Halsey had only two carriers at sea, and was planning to head to Sydney to join *Lexington* and *Yorktown*. All the lighter carriers were back in Pearl, except the hybrids that went to Suva for emergency repair work there. He did have one of the new escort carriers, the *Nassau*, but it was built to be more of an aircraft ferry than anything else. This was going to leave a gap in carrier coverage that could span the first two weeks of February. As he considered the situation, it now appeared that both sides had reached a similar pause in ground operations on all of the islands being contested. The US had Noumea, but not the main airfield that was still being guarded by Colonel Ichiki.

On Efate, the 8th Marine Regiment had been challenged by the Japanese 79th Regiment of their 20th division just in time to prevent that island from falling. Now the US controlled the main anchorage at Port Vila, and the Japanese had Havana Harbor in the north.

On Fiji, Collins was mustering his division at M'ba, and slowly reorganizing to shift his weight to the left flank, eyeing that saddle in the highlands as his only route to pressing the attack further. The rains continued unabated, swelling the streams leading into the M'ba River and making that largely impassable, and the Japanese held that sugar mill overlooking both bridges, digging in behind the river in a very good defensive position.

To the south, Patch was just a few kilometers south of Nandi, and if anything could be done, it would be his division that would have to do it in the short run. To that end, another regiment of the 37th Division on Vanua Levu was now making ready to hop over to Suva and take Queen's Road to reinforce Patch. This was the only expedient reinforcement at hand since MacArthur had sent the 41st to Noumea. It would give him five regiments to press his attack in February.

Elsewhere, the Japanese had taken Ndeni, called Nendo today, in the Santa Cruz Islands. The small airfield there had once been a lifesaving place for US airmen to land in the carrier duels fought around the New Hebrides, but it could no longer serve in that role.

With the 41st Division safely delivered to Noumea, Halsey met with MacArthur when he arrived in Sydney, and the two men discussed further plans.

"I told you we could take Noumea with no difficulty," said MacArthur. "We should have done it long ago. Then our planes would have cut off the Japanese supplies to Fiji."

"Should of? That horse never won a race," said Halsey. "It was a matter of not having adequate carrier support. Now we've got the flattops back, and we'll get results, I can assure you of that."

"Yes... but I'm told the fleet had another bad round with the Japanese, and those two out there in the repair yards are evidence of that."

"Yes, they hurt us," said Halsey. "*Wasp* was the hardest blow. But we'll have *Yorktown* and *Lexington* back in a week to ten days, then I can sortie with four fleet carriers again and conduct business. Anything I should know about?"

MacArthur lit his pipe, considering. "With the 41st at Noumea, our first order of business will be to get that airfield. We'll take it this week. There looks to be only one good battalion holding it now, reinforced with engineers. We cut off everything they had south of the harbor, but a recon plane spotted them moving north up the eastern coast road. I can kick them out of Tontouta and get the engineers to work on that field. We'll need secondary fields as well, closer to the harbor."

"Then no major troop movements I need to cover?"

"Not for the time being. What's the situation in the New Hebrides?"

"It looks like they're going to fight for Efate and Luganville. So when I leave here, I head for Pago Pago to escort the 6th Marine Regiment to Efate. That will double team them there. After that, Nimitz says he'll use the 1st Marine Division and hit Luganville with two regiments, the third being held in reserve."

"What about Fiji? You were all dead set on clearing that before I went to Noumea."

"That will take time. I intend to squeeze them hard, and I'll damn well

contest the movement of any supplies to that island from this point forward. They know that, and the *Kido Butai* isn't finished with us yet either. So a lot of this planning with the Marines will depend on what the Japs do. In the meantime, there was an incident at Truk yesterday."

"Truk? That's their main Pacific support base."

"Correct," said Halsey, "and it got hit—but we had nothing to do with it, and it certainly wasn't the British."

"Well then who?" MacArthur tamped down his tobacco, and relit the pipe.

"Intel thinks it's that Siberian raider, the ship that was covering their landings on Kamchatka and Sakhalin. They've tangled with it twice already, but haven't put it under, which surprises me, given the carrier power they could use."

"Interesting... How much damage did they do?"

"Just a knock on the door," said Halsey, "but the fact that they could even do that much is pretty amazing. This is the ship that is using those hot new naval rockets. Japs have them too, which is worrisome, because they're pretty damn lethal against our planes. The odd thing is that no one can figure out how the Russians and Japanese could get so far ahead of us with that stuff."

"Russians?"

"Well, we figure they were the ones that really built this Siberian ship. There isn't a shipyard worth the name in all of Siberia."

"Well, it's likely no more than a nuisance," said MacArthur. "I don't see how it could impact our operations here."

"True," said Halsey. "But that damn ship could start an arms race and we don't even have a ticket to the stadium. If the Japs start popping off fireworks and put missiles on all their cruisers and battleships, this war could look really different. At the moment, the deployment of those weapons seems very limited. In fact, our pilots report they were fired from only one ship. But where there's smoke, there's fire. We need to be vigilant on this."

That was to be an understatement.

Chapter 29

“Admiral,” said Gromyko. “It’s time we came to a decision as to what we will be doing on this sortie. I think the boat has settled down now.”

As far as they could tell, it had been September when they first arrived, making contact with Fedorov to arrange that rendezvous off the Dolphin’s Head. He never showed, but even if he had, *Kazan* would not have been found there. As it happened many times with *Kirov*, the shift back was somewhat bumpy. They appeared, then pulsed again, apparently vanishing into the ether. When the boat finally reappeared, months had passed. Their return to the past had been like a rock skipping on a pond, taking a short hop before it finally settled, and during that hop, they had taken on a new crewman, and a very important one—Admiral Volsky himself. 1942 was waning, and on New Year’s Eve, Volsky remembered everything.

Since that time they had been up under the ice for a good long while. Even though they had excellent charts of navigable channels from the Kara Sea to the Pacific, they all dated to the year 2021, where global warming had thinned out the ice considerably. This was 1943, and for some reason, the winter was unusually severe. Gromyko had consulted the historical records, and found temperatures much colder than those recorded, most likely due to the eruption of a volcano in the South Pacific. His radio man had picked up talk of that, but he could find no historical reference for it either. Clearly they history, as they once knew it, was no longer reliable—nor were their charts for submerged transit under all that ice.

Channels that should have been open were much narrower, and the ice was far thicker and deeper than they had believed it would be. This made for very slow going, easing along at five or six knots, and often slowing to a near crawl while sonar probed the way ahead. The only benefit of the process was that he would build all new charts for the ice in January 1943, though he did not see how he might ever use them again. So averaging no more than 120 nautical miles per day, it was going to take them over two weeks to make the transit. They would be under ice until they got all the way through the Norton Sound, and then down the coast of Kamchatka to the approach to Petropavlovsk.

Gromyko had a mind to consider stopping there to take on fresh food for the crew, but he needed to resolve a political problem first. He remembered very well the mission he had been given by Kamenski. When the Director first proposed it, they thought he would have to try and find Admiral Volsky after shifting back to the 1940s. He had disappeared well before *Kirov*'s final shift, and had no direct experience of the events that led Karpov to seize the ship in Murmansk after its second coming. There was a good deal this version of Kamenski did not know at that time, but as they continued the discussion, an idea came to him.

"A pity we can't just send the man we have at hand here," he said to Gromyko.

"Excuse me?" said Gromyko, not understanding.

"Volsky," said the Director. "There's a perfectly good version of the man right here, but he's from this sequence of events, this meridian in time, and has no knowledge of anything that happened."

That was one thing Gromyko could not quite fathom yet.

"Are you not from this same meridian of time, as you call it?"

"Yes, and I know what you are asking me with that. If I am from this timeline, then how is it I know all the things I've been talking about?"

Kamenski had given him a long and confusing explanation, and he had sorted through it in his mind for some time, remembering the Director's words.

"Time is rather fastidious," he had told him. "She doesn't like wasting things, and is very fussy about that. I was almost certain that my lease on life had run its course. Heaven knows, I've been given more than enough time in this world. But it seems there are more worlds than we think, and this is just another one. Fedorov wanted to know where the missing men were going. Where was Orlov and all the rest? Then he became one of those missing men himself. Yet time takes away, and time gives back as well. She found a place for him, as she just found a place for me when I vanished aboard *Kirov*. You can feel it coming, you know. You tend to feel a bit... insubstantial. For the longest time I thought it was that little treasure I had in my pocket, the key. You know nothing of that, but let's just say it was a kind of lucky charm. I thought it kept me safe and sound, but now I think it's just something that helps time go about her business."

"Director... I'm just not sure I'm following you here."

“Ah, forgive me if I tend to ramble on. The older you get, the more things you have tucked away up here, and time keeps pouring more tea in my cup. One day it will run over, but for now, I still hold it well enough. Let me put it to you this way. Suppose you were writing a story. You think you have it just the way you want, then you get an idea that simply must be given form and shape in the narrative. So you do a little editing here and there, and write a new chapter. At the end of the day, you save it, overwriting the old file with the new. That’s what time is doing. Well now, you would think your characters would have the good manners to forget the old file—the way things were before you made all those changes and additions to the story—but it seems they don’t, at least in my case. I’m a file that has been saved and replaced a good many times, but I remember each version of the story I lived in before. Yes, each and every one.”

And that was the genesis of Kamenski’s plan. Gromyko had been told to put out to sea, run his control rod procedure, and leave things to time. Once he got back to the 1940s—if he did get back at all—he was to try and find either Fedorov or Volsky. The first thing he did was call on the secure channel Fedorov had given him, and lo and behold, there was Fedorov. He said he was in an airship, and arranged to meet with him, but he never made that rendezvous, and that seems to have changed everything—yet again.

Now Gromyko finally understood what Kamenski had been trying to tell him with his metaphors about teacups and editing books. He knew it in the most direct way possible, because it had happened to him. The Captain had clear memories of leaving Severomorsk, running his procedure, shifting safely back and having that nice little chat with Fedorov. Then he turned in, eager for the bunk after a long day’s operations, and when he woke up to assume his shift in the command sail, everything was different.

The boat was in a different position, the crew a bit confused, and they soon learned that the time had shifted on them as well. It was as if they had slipped again, some strange after effect from the magic worked by that control rod.

Even his head was different, for in it now was a completely different version of his transit to this place! As he thought about it, he realized it must have been spawned by that errant remark made by Kamenski about having a perfectly good Admiral Volsky at hand. Now he recalled that plan in clear detail. Kamenski had put Volsky aboard in Severomorsk, confident at last

that if he did send that version of the Admiral along, Time would sort all the rest out.

“He’ll either get there, or he won’t,” Kamenski had told him. “If he turns up missing after you shift, it will most likely be because there is already another version of him there where you have arrived. Time won’t permit the two of them to cohabit that same milieu like that, and so the Admiral you take on board will simply not arrive with you when you shift.”

“You mean he’ll just vanish?”

“Something like that.”

“Where will he go?”

“Elsewhere. Never mind about that now Captain. Just worry about your mission. If he remains with you, all the better. Use the good Admiral to get close to Fedorov and that ship. If he vanishes, then look to find him at large somewhere in the world. Find him, or get to Fedorov. That’s the key.”

But there was Volsky that morning, right on his boat, and in Gromyko’s head he could now remember two versions of this mission, one where he left Severomorsk on his own, and a second where Kamenski put Admiral Volsky aboard. Apparently, something had happened, like a train being switched to a new track, and now he was sailing on the meridian where Volsky had boarded *Kazan* at the very beginning, and all the new memories of that were now in his head. But how? It must have been that little bump we took on landing here, he thought. The shift was not complete. We appeared, then vanished again, only to reappear with Volsky aboard. Very strange.

Gromyko didn’t know it yet, but something had indeed happened. Fedorov was behind it all. Instead of making his planned rendezvous with Gromyko, Fedorov’s airship overflew a hole in time, and he found himself back in 1908, right where he had intended to go in the first place. There he had the fate of all these meridians in his hand. The choice he made in that fateful encounter with Mironov, would cement the meridian that went forward from that moment. Time would allow many threads in her loom, but one day she must weave them all into one strand again and create the new Prime Meridian. Fedorov’s choice to spare Mironov, to spare Sergei Kirov, had decided the matter, and at that moment, a Heisenberg wave was generated that migrated forward, all the way to its real point of origin in the year 2021.

This tiny outlier of change was very small, just the first ripple in a series

of waves that would eventually sweep forward like a tsunami. Only one man was even aware of the change—more tea in his cup, or perhaps just one more chapter in his inner book—Pavel Kamenski. It was like a song that had begun on one of those old record players the Director was still fond of, and then the needle skipped, encountering a flaw, and was bumped back. That brief segment of the song played again, and only Kamenski knew why. So he realized that his plan to send Admiral Volsky might actually work now, because things had changed again. Fedorov's mercy had changed them, though he did not know that at the time.

So he sent the Admiral along, though it seemed that it would take some time for Volsky to wake up and have his own tired head filled with past lives—other versions of himself that had also taken this journey. To make sure that would happen, Kamenski slipped something into his pocket before he boarded *Kazan*—a small key. “Keep that safe for me, will you?” he had said with a smile.

And Volsky woke up as well, and he remembered—remembered everything, all the events that had been lived and experienced by any version of his own self that was entangled with the meridian in which he now found himself after *Kazan* shifted—the new Prime Meridian, the line of fate and causality that Fedorov had assured by failing to kill Sergei Kirov.

Now Gromyko had the whole thing tossed into his lap—the decision concerning the fate of another Kirov—not the man, but the ship. Kamenski had riveted that home....

“For now,” he told him, “we’ll start with the things we have control over—the men, the ship. We start with *Kirov*.”

“Well, what are we going to do?”

“Go back and get them out,” said Kamenski with a smile.

“Director, haven’t we tried that once already? Look what happened!”

“Yes, that’s a point well taken. We still have to try, because if we don’t...” Kamenski stopped, set his pipe down, and rubbed his eyes. “If we don’t, Mister Gromyko, then this is all going to unravel, this entire present moment I’ve called home for so long. It all depends on things that happened in the 1940s. Don’t you see? Well, they aren’t happening—at least not as they were supposed to. Things are changing, and we’re responsible. Never mind about trying to stop the war that is still on our doorstep here. Now it’s about something much more. If we don’t get back there and put a stop to all

this, then everything, and I mean everything, is going to come flying apart. How did that poet put it? Yes... *Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere, the ceremony of innocence is drowned. Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand. The Second Coming!*”

He looked at Gromyko now, and in his eyes there was a profound sadness, and a vast silence of finality. “That’s what caused it, the second coming of that ship to 1941. It created a loop, and if that doesn’t resolve properly there, if anything should happen to displace that ship to a moment prior to the time of its first arrival, then we face down Paradox yet again. Do this once, and you court a good deal of trouble, just as we experienced it. Do it twice... Desolation, Mister Gromyko, that is what we are facing now, complete and utter annihilation. The cold frost of infinity is out there, and it’s a savage end, a futile end to the whole damn world. And do you know why? *The second coming*, that’s why. *Kirov* went back, and now it’s gone back a second time. Understand? If that happens again, and again, and again... See what I mean? The changes are already starting to ripple forward in time. We don’t notice them yet, but I can tell. They may seem insignificant—different missiles for your submarine and all. That doesn’t seem all that earth shaking, but I assure you, it is only the beginning.”

“You mean if we don’t get them back here safely...”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. The whole damn loop will spin out again, and each time it does, the changes become more and more catastrophic. Try getting a future like this one sorted out under those circumstances. Don’t you see? Normally it takes... *time* for the variations to ripple forward to the future. But soon the changes will become so pronounced that they will reach this time, even before events have concluded in the past. That’s Mother Time’s problem now, and it’s also *our* problem. We started it, and so we’ll simply have to finish it.”

“But wait a moment... Didn’t you say this was, well, a different world, a different meridian of time here. Is *Kirov*’s intervention in your history recorded here? Could I read about it in a history book in your library?”

“Very astute,” said Kamenski. “The answer to your last question is no—there is no mention of any of those events in the history of this timeline. But that hardly matters. You see, this isn’t the Prime Meridian. It’s just one of

many possible alternative Meridians that could arise from events happening in the Prime Meridian. That's where *Kirov* is now, but the Prime is badly warped, bent out of shape, contaminated by all those missiles, and yes, nuclear bombs as well. It will change things, Mister Gromyko, and rather dramatically. It will change the fate of each and every possible meridian arising from those events—including this one. Understand? *Kirov* sits on the trunk of the tree, this is just one of the branches. But if you cut through that trunk, they all go down together. That's what *Kirov* is doing—cutting through the Prime Meridian like a buzz saw. So we have to go back, get them out, and that failing....”

He gave Gromyko those sad empty eyes again.

“We have to kill them,” said the Captain, understanding the darker side of the mission Kamenski was handing him now. “Kill *Kirov*, the ship—there won't be any magic tricks with a control rod this time. That's the only way we can really be certain this loop you speak of could not repeat—kill the ship and crew. That's why you want to load all those nice new missiles onto my boat.”

“Captain, as I said, you are a very astute man.”

A very astute man.... Gromyko smiled to himself. Yes, this was the trunk of the tree now. This was the new Prime Meridian, not the world he first came from, and not the world he returned to, finding Kamenski waiting for him there with this mission. This was the Prime, and it was now his mission to decide whether it would stand, or whether it would fall, and that all depended on the life or death of that ship, *Kirov*.

At least I don't bear the burden alone, he thought. Time shuffled the deck on me somehow, and I have an Ace in my hand this time—Admiral Volsky. It will be his choice, won't it.... But what if he decides that *Kirov* must live? Then what?

Something told him this mission had many dark corners to get around before it would ever end. Here he was, and with Admiral Volsky at his side, and now they had to decide what to do.

Chapter 30

“So then,” said Gromyko. “What is our plan?”

He was sitting with Admiral Volsky in his cabin, a private meeting so none of the other officers and crew might overhear. Kamenski had briefed them both when they departed, yet Gromyko was still bothered by the jumble of memories in his head. Who was he now? He clearly remembered the secret rendezvous when the Admiral and Fedorov first came aboard, sneaking in on a submersible as his sub remained hidden in the still dark waters beneath the *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

He had been at war in 2021, his submarine already clashing with the Americans when Karpov took *Kirov* and the Red Banner Pacific Fleet out. Then *Kirov* vanished with the unexpected eruption of the Demon Volcano, and he had taken on these two other officers, hearing their impossible tale as to where the ship had turned up. It wasn't dead as many in the fleet first thought. That volcano had sent Karpov's flotilla careening into the past, and now Gromyko was to take his boat back and look for it. But how?

That was when he learned of the control rod they had brought aboard, and its amazing effects. He could still recall how hard it had been to internalize all of that, get his mind around what was happening and come to accept it. In time, the mind could embrace every impossible thing. He had seen the reality of the past, and used the power of his boat to fight there.

Then, while caught up in yet another duel at sea in the Atlantic, they had encountered a most unexpected challenger. Chernov had been at his station, as always, when he spoke those most unwelcome words.

“Con.... Undersea contact. Possible submarine...”

Gromyko turned, a question in his eyes. “An uninvited guest,” he said. “German U-boat?”

There was a moment's hesitation as Chernov continued to toggle switches on the module he had been using to process the signal. “Sir... This sounds like a British sub.” His voice carried a note of alarm that surprised Gromyko, and he never liked surprises. “British? We were not informed they had anything out here.”

“Sir! This is crazy. It's reading as Astute Class!” He gave Gromyko a

shocked expression. “We got lucky and recorded one boat after learning its deployment date. It’s the only profile we’ve ever managed to get, but my readings are above a 90% match for this signal.”

“Impossible,” said Gromyko, but then a deeper instinct asserted itself, reptilian, a reflex born of many hours beneath the sea. “All stop!” he said. “Launch noisemaker sled number one. Then right rudder fifteen, down bubble fifteen! Rig for emergency silent running!”

Astute Class... And Director Kamenski was most curious about that when he heard about it, thought Gromyko. My own reaction was perhaps overblown. There I was, fighting the second World War, when suddenly I’m told we have a visitor from the third. In my mind, I had no way of knowing where I was. There was never any certainty on this boat from the moment they first brought that control rod aboard. I could have been anywhere. The boat could have shifted again for all I knew. Yet there was one sure thing that I could count on in those split seconds—Chernov. There was no way he would make a mistake and classify an old WWII boat as *Astute Class*. So I did what I would have done in 2021, fought as I would have fought there. We barely avoided that surprise attack, and when I threw my punch back at the unseen enemy, I wanted to make sure I killed him.

The next thing I know, the boat was somewhere else....

Now this.

Another mission with Volsky, and with the same objective as the first—find *Kirov*, bring it home, and that failing... kill the ship. Volsky looks tired, but he seems to have settled himself. Yes, he experienced the same thing I did, with memories of different lives all jumbled together in his mind, but now things have quieted, the shock of that receded, and he has been able to sort things through. I still don’t understand it—how could I be carrying all these memories in my head. Poor Volsky apparently has a good many more.

“Captain,” said the Admiral. “This is going to be a most delicate situation. Since Fedorov never kept his appointment with you, something must have happened to him—we know not what. But knowing that young man, I will bet he is still alive and well. We have remained radio silent up here for some time, but now I think we must contact the ship again. That would be the most direct way to address our problem.”

“It would reveal our presence here to Karpov,” said Gromyko.

“I understand what you are saying, but what else are we to do?”

“We could remain silent. If you might have to go to someone’s house and kill them, would you knock first? In that event, we must hit the ship the old-fashioned way. I don’t think it would be too hard to determine where they are. Karenin picked up some radio chatter just yesterday. Apparently, there was an attack at an important Japanese naval base.”

“That should not be surprising,” said Volsky.

“But it involved missiles....”

That got Volsky’s attention.

“Missiles? Then that must have been *Kirov*; Karpov. The man is fighting his own private little war with the Japanese out here. Such an attack would be very much in accord with the way Karpov thinks.”

“So we could just navigate to that sector and start the hunt there.”

“Suppose we do,” said Volsky. “I do not think we will just creep up on *Kirov* easily. You forget Tasarov.”

“Yes, yes, the best ears in the fleet. Our man Chernov is pretty damn good as well.”

“Yet one way or another, contact will occur,” said Volsky. “If we are to give Karpov the option of returning with us, then we’ll have to speak with him.”

“Frankly Admiral, I have very little hope in that. Didn’t we try to convince Karpov to return earlier? There he was, fighting the Japanese in 1908, and he was driven. I do not think he will be any different this time.”

“In that you may be correct.” Volsky shrugged. “He disobeyed a direct order from me to cooperate with us and return to 2021. Setting aside the fact that we have no idea whether or not we could even pull that off, Karpov will not want to cooperate this time either. He was quite determined to get control of *Kirov*, and now we see what he has in mind. He wants to fight the Japanese, and he will think that by doing so he can convince them to relinquish the territories they took from Russia after his last intervention failed in 1908. In fact, if we do contact him, he will throw that at us right from the beginning. He will say it was our interference that prevented him from settling things in 1908.”

“Then our only other choice is to do it on the sly,” said Gromyko. “Stealth is what this submarine is all about. I’m willing to bet I can get this boat into missile range before Tasarov hears us.”

“Which then presents us with the uncomfortable decision as to whether or

not we fire.” Volsky was obviously bothered by that idea. “That is a good ship out there; a good crew. All of those men are like sons to me, which is why I suppose they came to call me Papa Volsky. The thought of killing them all is hard for me to even contemplate. But yet, Kamenski is convinced that we must do so as a last resort. I do not say I even understand the threat he sees so darkly, but I have been troubled by this for a good long while. When messages come from a future that we cannot even know, and they warn of our ship, it is more than troubling. It is deeply disturbing.”

“Messages?” Gromyko gave him a blank look.

“Signals that were aimed at this shadowy group founded by my good friend, Admiral Tovey. He called it the Watch, and I suppose we are the reason for that.”

“What did they say?”

“Beware of a ship... beware *Kirov*.”

There was a moment of silence, before the Admiral spoke again. “So it has something to do with everything Kamenski told you, and he went over it all again with me before I stepped aboard again. Well Captain, if it came down to it, how would you fight *Kirov*?”

“With everything I have,” said Gromyko. “It’s likely we’ll get into missile range, and they gave me a new set of some very sharp teeth.”

“Yes, the new Zircon MOS-III. How many?”

“Two full silos of eight missiles each. The remainder are the older Kalibr Class cruise missiles. I have another eight of the long-range 3M-14-K Series. That gives me striking power out to 2500 kilometers, and with a 450 kilogram warhead. But that is the land attack variant. The remaining sixteen missiles are the 3M-54-K, a shorter range variant out to 660 kilometers, but with the smaller 200-kilogram warhead. That was the dedicated anti-ship variant, though I suppose I could use the land attack missile against a water borne target as well.”

“It may interest you to know that *Kirov* also has the Zircon—ten missiles. They also carried older P-900s and there were 40 of the Moskit-IIs. I have no idea how many Karpov may have expended since he took over the ship. Fedorov would certainly know, assuming Karpov did not throw him into the brig.”

“The missiles don’t matter to me,” said Gromyko. “I won’t be firing from the surface. That’s where I have the real advantage. Their entire missile

inventory is useless in this fight. All I have to worry about is their torpedoes.”

“Remember, they have three helicopters.”

“That is the real threat,” said Gromyko. “They expand their ASW search radius, and if they get a good idea where we are, they can drop sonobuoys to refine that contact and then we get trouble. It’s a pity that no one ever managed to put decent SAMs on a submarine. I’ve got the mast mounted 9k34 Strela 3, but its range is just a whisker over four kilometers. That might get a helo that was hovering right on top of us, but little more. Give me the S-400. That would really be a game changer. A few silos of those, and I would be virtually unbeatable against those helos or ASW planes. Then again, to see them I’d have to have my head above water, and for an old sub driver like me, that is the last place I want to be in a fight.”

“Yes, you would have to expose your sensor mast to target the helicopters,” said Volsky. “That would make your position known, particularly after you fire your SAM. All the helo has to do is fire their torpedo in response. You might shoot down that helo, but then you would have to deal with that torpedo in the water, and perhaps more than one. It would also tell the enemy mother ship exactly where you are, and *Kirov* has three helicopters.”

“So both sides have good face cards in their hand,” said Gromyko. “As it stands, they are vulnerable to my stealth and missile attacks, but we are vulnerable to those helos. The key is who finds the other first.”

Volsky shrugged. “It’s a pity that we even have this conversation,” he said. “Here we are, discussing our Assassin’s Creed. It is most unseemly.”

“So there is no way Karpov might be reasoned with?”

“I find that most unlikely.”

“Then if I had to kill that ship, I would start with a full salvo of those 3M-54-E Series missiles, but I would want a firing position that would mask their approach for as long as possible.”

“Explain,” said Volsky.

“If I could find the ship close to one of these islands—a nice big fat one—then I would fire from the opposite side of that island. If it had sufficient elevation, it would create a radar blind spot. I would fire right down that dark zone, and then they might not pick up the missiles until they start their final attack maneuvers. They would climb to avoid the land mass, and then immediately dive for the high-speed terminal run at sea level.”

“Do you think they would get through? *Kirov*’s missile defense shield is very good.”

“All we need is one good hit. I hesitate to bring this up, but if this was real war—the kind I trained to fight in 2021, then the last missile in that salvo would have a special warhead. If I see the first fifteen shot down, then we detonate the last one before they get it. The blast wave, shock and EMP will all have strong effects.”

“Yet there may be other exotic effects as well,” said Volsky. “Remember what happened to you in the Atlantic.”

“Only too well.”

“You know,” said Volsky. “This may sound odd, but there are three layers of memory in my mind. One is the life I led when we first left Severomorsk to go out for those live fire exercises. The ship was carrying a lot of older munitions then, just to get rid of them. We were going to double down on the Zircon after we reached Vladivostok. The second layer of memory is from the second coming of *Kirov*, and we had much the same in terms of overall weaponry, but better SAMs. Yet I also remember the life I was living in when Kamenski herded me into his little scheme here. In that world, the one that just serviced your ship, there was no *Kirov*, at least not any ship by that name. It was renamed *Admiral Ushakov*, just as the *Frunze* was renamed *Admiral Lazarev*. Both those ships had troubled reactors, and are scheduled to be scrapped. So only two of the Four Boys, as we called them, were still at sea.”

“And the other two brothers?”

“Oh, those were renamed as well and eventually put into deep modernization programs, the *Admiral Nakhimov* was finished in 2018, and *Pyotr Veliky* in 2021. They got new teeth, ten 3S-14 vertical launch system modules that could each hold eight missiles. That dramatically increased firepower and endurance, from the 20 old P-700s we were carrying, to eighty SSMs. *Pyotr Velikiy*, for example, got all Zircon class missiles.”

“Formidable,” said Gromyko.

“You see, we never cannibalized those ships to build the new version of *Kirov*. They are still from the original class, yet vastly upgraded. Strange how in these other two life lines the ship seems to be different from the models we created in the world I come from.”

“Yet all three are dangerous,” said Gromyko. “Is *Kirov* carrying special

weapons?”

“Of course. They will have at least three.”

“Would Karpov resort to using them?”

“He already has! In the first time loop, there was no Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor as a result. After the second coming, the ship went north to Murmansk instead of south into the Atlantic, and we have Mister Fedorov to thank for that. So, one turn of that ship’s rudder, and we get Pearl Harbor back. I can see how the men from the future might fear *Kirov*, and why they sent Tovey’s group those warnings. Captain, that is a clever attack plan, though one that would need *Kirov* to be in a particular spot to succeed. What if it fails?”

“After moving off axis to one side or another, I would then continue to close until I got inside Zircon range. Then I would fire all sixteen of those, and the last with a special warhead. If they manage to stop them, then I go to the Kaliber 3M-54-E1s, and when in range, I throw all eight. After that, it’s down to torpedoes, but I think I would have killed that ship before things got that far.”

“Yes,” said Volsky. “They’ll have to expend a lot of SAMs to get those Zircon missiles. They move too damn fast. They won’t be able to rely on one S-400 getting a hit each time. So it may come down to how many arrows Karpov still has left in his quiver, and whether or not we can achieve surprise.”

“He knows we’re out here somewhere,” said Gromyko. “Fedorov certainly knows.”

Part XI

The Missing Egg

“A guy walks into a psychiatrist's office and says, hey doc, my brother's crazy! He thinks he's a chicken. Then the doc says, why don't you turn him in? Then the guy says, I would but I need the eggs.”

— Woody Allen

Chapter 31

Admiral Volsky thought for some time, listening to the quiet hum of the boat, feeling its sleek, stealthy power as it glided beneath the sea. What were they planning to do here? Gromyko was laying out the best possible strategy for his attack on *Kirov*, on the ship and crew that he felt so close to in his mind and heart. There were memories there, layer upon layer, that he could not push aside. He imagined the string of missiles this sub would fire, emerging from the sea and starting their deadly run in to the target. There was Fedorov, Rodenko, Nikolin, Tasarov, Samsonov, and yes, his dear old friend Doctor Zolkin.

“I don’t like it,” said Volsky. “I know it makes the best military sense to attack as you advise, but I cannot steal up on that ship and unload all these missiles. I cannot sit here, wondering whether they have killed that ship and crew. No, Captain, I think I must first knock on that door.”

Gromyko nodded. He had made his case for how he would attack if pressed, but deep down, he was not eager to do so. “I understand,” he said. “Yet what ammunition do you have that might prevail over Karpov?”

“That remains to be seen. Can they pick up a signal on the secure comm-link?”

“It was designed for extreme long range communications.”

“Very well, I want to use it... Now.”

Gromyko extended his hand, pointing the way as they stepped out of his cabin and went down the narrow passage towards the command sail. Stopping at the bridge, he told Belanov to run shallow and deploy the sail mast for long range communications. They found the signals station, where Lieutenant Alexi Karenin was at his post, head lost in his earphone set, listening. Jr Lieutenant Genzo Gavrilov was at his side, the man the crew called “GG.” Born in Vladivostok, his father had married a Japanese woman from Hokkaido, and Genzo was bilingual, with fluent Japanese as his second language. The two men had been listening to Japanese radio traffic.

“Anything new?” asked Gromyko.

“Sir, we picked up the code phrase 8-E-YU. That’s Admiral Nagumo, and he was ordered to make a course change west into the Solomons.”

“Genzo? What’s up?”

“We think it has something to do with that hit on the base at Truk, sir. The last course track we had on that task force put it heading for Truk.”

“So they don’t want their carriers in harm’s way,” said Gromyko. “Karpov must have shaken them up. Very well, that will be all Mister Gavrilov. Dismissed.”

“Aye sir.” GG Saluted, then gave a nod to Karenin as he left. The Captain cleared out the area surrounding the comm station, and sent several crewmen off to do something or another so they would have some privacy.

“Mister Karenin, fire up the secure command link set and raise *Kirov*.” That surprised the Lieutenant, but with the Captain and Fleet Admiral standing there he was all business. He sent the coded signal that Nikolin would receive moments later.

* * *

There it was again.

Nikolin’s heart jumped when the signal came in. It was two cyphers off the normal EAM command link channel, a special frequency variation that had been pre-arranged by Fedorov long ago. It was the code, and the first time he saw it an avalanche of memories had come tumbling into his head. It seemed to him afterwards, that he had been living in a strange fog, but now everything was clear again. Now he remembered it all, how they had arrived here so long ago on that first ship, and all that had happened to them. But he had not said a single word about it to anyone... except Doctor Zolkin.

His heart racing as before, he looked to find the Captain, glad that it was Fedorov’s shift. “Sir,” he said. “I have a secure authenticated message on the HF Comm-link system.”

Fedorov raised an eyebrow. “It was properly coded?”

“Aye sir. The ID designator has it as *Kazan*.” He gave Fedorov a wide-eyed look.

Now it was Fedorov who felt his pulse rise. He knew *Kazan* was out there somewhere, but Gromyko had been last reported in the Barents Sea. The rendezvous he had arranged on his mission to Ilanskiy months ago had never taken place, but there had been no communication with the submarine since that time.

“Thank you, Mister Nikolin. I will take your post for the time being. That

will be all.”

“Aye sir.”

“And Nikolin... Say nothing of this communication. Just go have a nice late breakfast. You can return in one hour.”

“Understood sir.” Nikolin saluted and was on his way, a thousand questions in his mind. Then Fedorov settled into his warm chair, placing the headset over his ears, and speaking in a low voice.

“*Kazan, Kazan*, this is Captain Fedorov aboard *Kirov*. We receive and authenticate your code. Come back. Over.”

“We read you, *Kirov*. This is Captain Ivan Gromyko. Something tells me you are still a long way from the Dolphin’s Head. Shall we try this rendezvous somewhere else? Over.”

The two men would have a brief conversation where Fedorov would learn why *Kazan* had gone silent. “You phased,” he explained. “That happened to us more than once after a shift. It can sometimes take a while for things to settle into the new timeframe.”

“Yes,” said Gromyko. “We also skipped forward a few more months in time. It was September when we made that tryst to meet off the Dolphin’s Head. Then we skipped forward and the year was damn near gone.”

“It happens,” said Fedorov. “Perhaps like a plane taking a hop on landing.”

“Something more occurred,” said Gromyko. “It’s difficult to describe, but perhaps the best way is to let you hear from him. Standby, *Kirov*.”

Gromyko looked over at Volsky, who was sitting at his side now with another headset. He toggled a switch, but as he did so, he noticed that the Admiral’s eyes were watered over, as if he were overcome with emotion.

“Mister Fedorov,” he said softly. “I cannot tell you how good it is to hear your voice again.”

At the other end of that transmission Fedorov sat there in complete shock. How often do the dead call home to the living? Yet the voice he heard now was unmistakable. It was Volsky.

“Admiral?” his voice quavered a bit.

“One and the same,” Volsky came back.

“But... Sir...”

“Yes, I know you must have received some very hard news of my fate. How I come to be here now is a bit of a mystery, even to me, and particularly

since I'm really not sure who I am these days. I was sitting quietly in my office at Fleet Headquarters, when I walked a most remarkable man."

He told him of the visit from Kamenski, and of the Director's plan. "So you see, there is still a world out there that is safe and sound from all the changes you worry so much about. I was living in it. Yet now, after this little journey here, that man sits quietly beneath two others in my mind. It is all very strange. I have memories of those last days on the ship, the first ship. Do you know you went missing there, Fedorov? I mourned that a good long while, before fate came calling for me. Then again, I have memories of leaving Murmansk on that British sub after Karpov took the ship. Until the darkness fell on me in the Atlantic when we fought with the *Hindenburg*."

"Yes sir... I went through this myself when *Kirov* returned—memories on top of memories, two lives mingled together in one head. There I was on the bridge, knowing men like Orlov and Karpov should not be there, but unable to realize why I could remember all that had happened before, when no one else could."

"We've been remade," said Volsky. "The both of us, or so it seems, and I am a most fortunate man. I suppose only one other man has ever made the claim that he has risen from the dead, and I do not presume to be his equal. Yet here I am. Time has put me here, and for a very grave reason. If the Director were here, he could explain it all to you, but I think you have heard some of it before—the dire dilemma we face because of the presence of *Kirov* in these waters. You recall how we discussed it before?"

"I do sir..." Fedorov was finally getting himself under control, thrilled to have Volsky back, a man that had been like a father to him, his stalwart ally through the travail of all these trials and adventures.

"Well, we have work to do here, Mister Fedorov. Kamenski is convinced that the ship cannot remain here. We must all get home. We tried this before, with *Kazan* attempting to do the heavy lifting, but it could not carry itself far enough forward with *Kirov* on its back. Yet we have a new control rod now—a new Rod-25 if you will. It's a long story, but all Kamenski's doing, and hear now what he has placed upon our shoulders."

The Admiral spoke quietly, telling him that the same urgent mission was at hand again. They had to get the ship home, remove its contagion from the time line here, assure that no further paradox might occur, and allow this history to move forward on its own. Yet even as he explained that, they both

knew that there was one great stumbling block before them—Vladimir Karpov.

“He won’t want to hear this,” said Fedorov. “He’s an Admiral now—self-appointed, and so much more. He’s taken a liking to his position here, and the power he has gathered to himself. And he’s also quite fond of the little war he’s fighting with the Japanese. We just attacked their naval base at Truk! Now he wants to look for bigger fish at Rabaul.”

“I see...” Volsky considered. “How do you think he would take the news of my return?”

“It would certainly be shocking,” said Fedorov. “Yet remember, he sees himself as evolved beyond any obligation to the authority you represent. In fact, he has flatly stated that he has no intention whatsoever of trying to return to our own time. Better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven.”

“That sounds very much like Karpov,” said Volsky. “Yet if he cannot be convinced of the gravity of our situation, that will present us with a very difficult choice here—the same choice we had before in the Sea of Japan.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Do you think he can be reasoned with? Do you think if we press the seriousness of this matter on him, the two of us could get through to him?”

“We could try,” said Fedorov. “If he holds the line and refuses to cooperate, then I hate to think of the alternative.”

“Yes, that will be very difficult. It would certainly place you in great danger there. Would not Karpov see you as an enemy?”

“I have been at odds with him for some time, as you well know. But Admiral, things have happened since we learned you were killed. I... I thought all of this was my fault, the danger to this world and all those that follow this time. I thought I could make one last attempt at undoing my many mistakes. You remember what I discovered at Ilanskiy?”

“Yes of course, that stairway.”

“Correct. Well, I wanted to use that to go back and... reclaim that errant whisper. I wanted to try and prevent Sergei Kirov from doing what he did. Karpov and I discussed it at great length. We had a plan, but in the end, he decided against it, even while my mission was already underway. It’s a long story, but I did get to Ilanskiy—to the year 1908—though not the way I thought I would. And I found Mironov—Sergei Kirov. I had steeled myself to do the only sure thing that might absolutely prevent him from killing Josef

Stalin. But in the end, I wasn't man enough to pull that trigger..."

Volsky took a moment to digest that. "No Fedorov, you were man enough *not* to pull that trigger. I would not have expected anything different from you. The world turned on the mercy you showed that man. It was a world born of that single act of compassion, and it will be what it will be—but not with us here. We must leave—all of us—*Kirov, Kazan, the Argos Fire*, all those men you met in the desert, the little fleet of transports, everything must go. Those that will not leave of their own accord must be compelled by other means.... or be destroyed. I would speak with Karpov on this, and I am willing to do so if he will hear me. Whether he would heed any order I might give at this point is doubtful. We had every reason to believe that he would not heed my warning, and being faced with this decision, we have steeled ourselves to take a more difficult path if necessary. Yet I could not raise my hand against my old ship and crew without having this conversation first, and I clung to the hope that we might reach an accommodation. It may be our *last* hope, Mister Fedorov, the last hope of tomorrow. So I must ask you to take this to Karpov. If he will hear us out, perhaps we can avert the doom Kamenski fears."

Fedorov considered all this, and was inwardly torn. He had thought his mission to Ilanskiy, returning to the source of the first major contamination at that point, would be the last hope, but that slipped from his grasp when he could not bring himself to kill Sergei Kirov. Now here was the Admiral, the man once dead living again, returning from a future that was still there, still intact, his head filled with the recollection of all his other doppelgangers from tangled time meridians.

There was grave danger ahead. The Admiral's proposal, and his determination that no stone must be left unturned here, was fraught with peril. Fedorov had come to the same place Karpov had, albeit with great reluctance. He had thought that there was now nothing they could do to change the world they were living in. They could only do one thing—win this war. He had set down the impossible burden of thinking he could re-write all the history that had been so badly shattered by their actions, and come instead to do the one thing that remained doable in his mind—they could use the power they had, in the ship beneath his feet, to win the war and at least nudge the world closer to the course that it had taken in the post war history he knew so well.

“Sir,” he said tentatively. “This war... the things we have already done have changed it dramatically. The Allies are finally fighting back, but the issue remains in doubt. The Axis remains very strong, and there is a real possibility that they might prevail. Karpov has been trying to avert that possibility all along. It was his aim to try and reset the conditions that prevailed in our world in the Pacific, and with *Kirov*, there remains a chance they he might succeed.”

“That may be so,” said Volsky. “With *Kazan* those odds get longer. Yes, we can certainly weigh in to profoundly affect the outcome of this war, and I suppose we should discuss that. Kamenski believes that will expose us to great peril—not just us, but the future world that follows. He could not say what that peril was—something we do here, or perhaps something we fail to do—who can say? You remember the warnings Tovey’s group received. Beware a ship... Beware *Kirov*. Those warnings were sent from the future, from men who saw the final outcome of all we are now struggling with. They have seen something we cannot fathom from this point in time. Not even Kamenski can see it; not with all his arcane wisdom and genius for sorting all this time business through. But he can *feel* it, Fedorov, like a man who senses the impending edge of an event that has not yet come to pass. Call it prescience, call it a hunch, but he can feel the doom that Elena Fairchild first voiced to us, the same shadow and final darkness that professor tried to explain. What was his name again?”

“Dorland,” said Fedorov. “Professor Paul Dorland.”

Chapter 32

Arch Facility, Berkeley, California, 2021

Paul Dorland emerged from the great doorway, seeing Maeve and Kelly there to greet him. He had just come through the successful retraction shift in the Arch, returning from the meeting with Tovey and Fairchild in the Azores.

“A welcoming committee,” he said with a grin. “Two out of three isn’t bad. Where’s Nordhausen?”

“Where else,” said Maeve. “He’s up on the history module trying to sort out all the splinter threads that we’re dealing with now. I should be there too to make sure he doesn’t jump to any conclusions we can’t live with.” Maeve Lindford was head of Outcomes and Consequences, the small group responsible for analyzing the conditions resulting from time interventions. Her honey red hair curled onto the shoulders of the white lab coat she was wearing.

At her side was Kelly Ramer, the computer genius responsible for keeping all the equipment up and running, maintaining the live RAM data bank, reviewing the Golem reports, and crunching the numbers required to shift anyone in time, the calculus of infinity, as he called it. Their missing comrade, Robert Nordhausen, was the historian, sleuthing the record of the past to identify key nexus points where the course of events shifted and turned, key push points on the continuum.

“I’ll bet the Golems are going crazy,” said Dorland. He was referring to a widely distributed computer program created by Kelly Ramer that was constantly searching the massive body of generated news on the Internet for references to historical events, and comparing it to the history of those events as permanently recorded in their RAM data bank. Golems would send reports to the Meridian Team computers, which would warn of possible variations or alterations forming in the history, the effects of possible tampering in the past.

“It isn’t just the Golems,” said Kelly. “We’ve got real fragmentation of the Meridian now. It all originated from the Nexus in 1908, but now we’ve identified at least three different threads.”

“Threads?”

“It’s a new term he’s using now,” Maeve explained. “I wanted to call them splinters.”

“Well I can generate new material for the lexicon as well,” said Kelly, raising his chin in mock defense of his creation.

“You certainly can,” said Paul. “Threads... Like threads of a conversation in an online forum?”

“Something like that.”

“And you say we’ve got three? Explain.”

“It’ll be a doozy,” said Maeve. “What it boils down to is that the Prime Meridian has now fragmented, or split apart.”

“More like how the branches split off from the trunk of a tree,” put in Kelly.

“Right,” said Maeve. “We normally monitor variations in recorded history for the Prime Meridian—now we’ve got three.”

“I was afraid of this,” said Paul. “And you say it originated in 1908?”

“June 30, to be precise.”

“The Tunguska Event,” said Paul. “That even caused damage to the integrity of Time itself.”

“Then why didn’t we detect it sooner?” asked Kelly.

“Who knows,” said Paul. “Perhaps it was like a hairline fracture. That happened to me once. I was pushing a massive table in my home years ago, when my feet slipped and my jaw came right down on the table top. It split my chin open on the surface of the skin, though that healed in a week or two. I later found that it did more unseen damage—only I didn’t learn about it for decades after, when I was chewing on a piece of hard pizza crust and broke a molar. That tooth had been bothering me for years, then it finally broke, and the dentist confirmed that it was apparently from a very old hairline fracture in the tooth. So whatever hit the earth at Tunguska may have caused damage at various points in the continuum. We’re only now discovering the extent of the fissures it may have opened, and it also left fragments of some exotic material that can have alarming properties where time is concerned.”

“Yes,” said Maeve. “It’s a mess, and now we’ve got three branches or threads breaking off from what we thought was the Prime Meridian, and they all generate slightly different Outcomes and Consequences. The question is, how do we know which thread to work on?”

“A good point,” said Paul. “Let’s go have a look.”

“I assume you had a satisfactory meeting?”

“You might say so. I’ve learned a good deal in talking with this Admiral Tovey and the woman on that other ship, the *Argos Fire*. The two are related. When *Kirov* first arrived, Tovey created a group inside the Royal Navy called the Watch.”

“Right,” said Maeve. “We’ve got that in the Alpha thread.”

“Well this Elena Fairchild and company was a member of that group. In fact, she was promoted to their senior Watchstander, and the ship she was on was ordered to a location where they found a device that was capable of moving the *Argos Fire* in time.”

“A device?”

“A box, or that’s the way it was described to me. They said it contained a fragment from the Tunguska Event.”

“This is beginning to add up,” said Maeve.... “The *Argos Fire*.... “We’ve searched all over for older references to that ship, yet we didn’t think it could be the ship we identified here in 2021.”

“Until it was lost the other day off the coast of Greece,” said Kelly. “The Brits thought the Russians were behind that, so they hit a Russian Destroyer with one of their subs in reprisal, then all hell broke loose. The Russians retaliated, it went tit for tat for a while, then the whole thing went tits up yesterday—sorry, Maeve.”

“Tits up?”

“The Russians threw an ICBM at a British Petroleum facility in Southern Egypt—the oil drilling installation at Sultan Apache. I think they were trying to kill two birds with one stone. There’s been a lot of tension around the energy centers, Nigeria, the Caspian Basin, the Gulf of Mexico with that big rig disaster. Well, they smashed that BP facility, and also took out a British Army brigade there. That attack went part and parcel with another in the Atlantic. They targeted a relief convoy the British were sending to Mersa Matruh.”

“I know all about it. That brigade got blown right into 1942, and so did those ships.”

“Yes,” said Maeve. “We’ve been able to piece that together in the research, but only in the Beta Thread. There’s no sign of that brigade fighting in North Africa in the Alpha or Gamma threads.”

“Interesting,” said Paul. “Then I was on the Beta thread, and it certainly turned up there. This is serious. If the situation continues to deteriorate here, these nuclear detonations could continue to rupture time as well as space. Actually, naming them separately is a bit deceptive. It’s spacetime, if Einstein was correct, and there’s only one of it. That meridian I was just on is very skewed. Did you find any evidence of a G3 Class battlecruiser there?”

“You’d have to ask Nordhausen.”

“Ask Nordhausen,” came a voice, and in walked the professor, his eyeglasses shifted up high above his eyebrows, a smile lighting his eyes beneath his balding head.

“G3 Class battlecruiser in the Royal Navy,” said Paul. “Ever turn up anything like that?”

“HMS *Invincible*,” said Nordhausen.

“That’s the one.”

“The Brits have that ship, but it was never supposed to have been built, at least not on Alpha thread, and then a good many others turned up. Both sides seem to have built ships that never existed. The British have new heavy cruisers, the Germans have carriers, the Americans and Japanese are fusing the two together and building battle-carriers. You’ll have a field day with it all when I show you the research.”

“Those ships are the least of our worries,” said Paul. “the Paradox created a Doppelganger—and that’s just for starters. It also started a causality loop.”

“That’s what gave us the Beta thread,” said Maeve. “Here we thought we were just dealing with an alteration to the Alpha thread, but then we get this incredible branching off to create the Beta thread. Now we’ve got a third.”

“Yes, yes,” said Paul. “This is just what I was afraid of. The damage that Russian ship has done is so profound that the Prime Meridian fragmented. That was predicted to be a forerunner occurrence for a Grand Finality.”

“Grand Finality?” Nordhausen could quote chapter and verse on the history, but he left the time travel physics to Dorland.

“I just got through explaining this to Admiral Tovey and Miss Fairchild. It’s like this... a kind of Gordian knot in time,” said Paul. “These variations and Paradox events get time so doubled back on itself, that an insoluble looping begins to occur.”

“You mean with the ship?”

“Correct. It just arrived there the second time, but I’ve been back in

August of 1941. Did it persist on any of these threads?”

“Oh yes,” said Nordhausen. “The whole thing seems to be in flux. I mean I get new Golem alerts all the time now, but I was just looking over some data that has the ship at war in the Pacific. There was an attack at a place called Truk—January of 1943.”

“Truk?” Paul rolled his eyes. “That was Combined Fleet Naval headquarters for Japan, but the Americans didn’t attack it until February of 1944. Who hit it?”

“That goddamned ship, what else.”

“Good Lord.” Paul rubbed his forehead. “So the ship stays there until at least 1943? Well, the longer it’s there, the greater the danger that it will slip again. That’s what happened the first time. It slipped to a point on the continuum before its first arrival. If the damn thing slips again, then we get another Paradox looming on the Meridian where that happens. Time cannot find a way to resolve this, and so it all gets spun into an endless replay. That’s what the finality is. If this happens the future simply ceases to exist, because time cannot progress beyond the point of the finality, or at least that is what the theory predicts.”

“But we’re that future, are we not?” said Nordhausen. “Doesn’t it have to exist for us to know this here?”

“In one sense, yes. Some future may be realized, but to a point.”

“All three splintered Meridians account for all the years between 1943 and this year.” The professor folded his arms.

“Yet we already know that the future beyond this point goes silent,” said Paul, “and with these nukes being lobbed about, I can possibly see why. Since the future cannot be created in the line of causality, it must be destroyed, and that creates a deep shadow that ripples backwards on the continuum like a backwash from Paradox. This may be the reason the voices from our own distant future have all gone mute, for there, the impact of all these changes will be most severe—annihilation—and that is a silence that will eventually roll back upon us all... My god, I just spoke those words to Tovey and Fairchild.”

Maeve cast a furtive glance at the others. “Well, Maestro, you must have been on the Beta thread for that little meeting. We haven’t told you everything. Welcome to the Gamma thread. Wait until you hear what’s been going on with that ship!”

* * *

Karpov sat in his stateroom, close by the private cabinet that he always kept under lock and key. It was open now, his eyes searching over the device within, a headset framing his brow as he listened. It was another radio set, of the same kind that they had given to Admiral Tovey. He had it rigged to transfer any signal received on Nikolin's HF comm-link module, particularly coded transmissions, which would be decrypted if authenticated by Nikolin.

He had been reading at his desk that morning, and looking over maps of the area around Rabaul, considering his plans. Then he saw the special light he had rigged winking off and on above the cabinet, and reached slowly into his pocket for the cabinet key.

He heard everything that was said, profoundly shocked when he first heard the voice of Admiral Volsky. Could the report of his death have been a deception? That was the first thing that came to mind. Yet there he was, apparently out on another mission aboard *Kazan*, just as before, and its aim was the same as it had always been.

The Admiral's seemed to be obsessed with this great doom that was looming in the far horizons of these events. Who can say what it might be. Yet the one thing that stuck in Karpov's mind was that single phrase from Volsky: We must leave—all of us—*Kirov*, *Kazan*, the *Argos Fire*, all those men you met in the desert, the little fleet of transports, everything must go. Those that will not leave of their own accord must be compelled by other means.... or be destroyed.

Or be destroyed....

So there was Admiral Volsky, he thought, alive again, risen from the dead, just as I seemed to return from what seemed like my certain demise. They must have been very surprised when they learned I was still alive. Yet I settled things, didn't I. Fedorov has been all about doom and gloom from the very beginning of this adventure. First he was manic about his history, then his head was filled with all this paradox business. That is what this must still be all about—the Second Coming.

I must admit that it certainly had some very real effects. I felt them myself during that terrible night aboard *Tunguska*. Yet I survived them easily enough. Time has been lusting to find a way to redress that. There are two of

us now, my brother and I. She cannot abide that, and looks for any way to balance her books.

So here comes Volsky again, just when I thought that man was dead and buried for good. And here comes *Kazan*.... What should I do about this? Fedorov cozied up to me real good when he returned from that mission. He realized, as I did, the consequences of his tampering at that foundational level of these events. This world rests on the shoulders of Sergei Kirov. He built it, and now he's fighting to save it, just as I am. I thought I had finally convinced Fedorov of that, but now here comes old Papa Volsky, and he'll muddle the waters with this business stuffed into his head by Kamenski.

What to do here?

Fedorov will bring this to me, and if I refuse to hear Volsky out, then what? Is he going to turn to his henchman Gromyko? Does he think he can kill this ship that easily? If I do agree to a meeting, how should I arrange it? I suppose it was at least decent of Volsky to make this call. Yet he did not sound like that bumbling old fool I met in Murmansk. No. He spoke of things that man could have never known, and this thing Fedorov said about two lives being mingled together in one head is most interesting.

Perhaps that was supposed to happen to me.

That thought suddenly shook him. Perhaps Time was going to merge the recollections and experiences I lived through into the body and head of my brother self when the Second Coming happened. Yes... That was what was supposed to happen, but Time could not accomplish it. I was in some kind of protective Faraday Cage aboard *Tunguska*, and she couldn't touch me. I was elsewhere. There might have been only one version of myself, just like Fedorov, but one who remembered all that had happened on that first loop. Very interesting... If this happened to Fedorov and Volsky, then might it also happen to other members of the crew?

Now he reached a decision.

I must meet with those two rascals, he thought. They have been my enemies in the past, but Fedorov gave me his word that he would stand with me here. Volsky wants to have his little talk, so I will hear him out, but they will hear me out as well. How to best arrange this?

First things first... Fedorov.

Chapter 33

As predicted, Fedorov went to Karpov, his heart heavy and mind very troubled when he knocked on the stateroom door. He could not see how he might persuade Karpov, or how their present situation would be any different than the sortie they made to 1908 if he failed, but he had to try.

“Come.”

He opened the door, removing his cap as he eased in and closed it securely behind him. Karpov was sitting at his desk, his eyes scanning paperwork under an LED lamp. “What is it, Mister Fedorov?”

“Sir, we’ve received a secure message on the EAM comm-link system, and we need to discuss it.”

Karpov looked up, rubbed his eye as if to chase away an annoying tick, and gave Fedorov a look that seemed to indicate he had come to some inner decision. “I don’t feel like theater this morning,” he said. “Yes, Mister Fedorov, we certainly need to discuss this one, don’t we. You see, I have a secure comm-link unit right here, and I have it rigged to alert me to any pass-code level communications. So you might as well know that I was listening in on your entire conversation with Volsky. Amazing, eh? That old man simply refuses to die. I must say, I was as shocked as you must have been when I heard his voice.”

Fedorov raised a brow, surprised again, not so much that Karpov had been listening, but more that he had not anticipated that from a man like the Siberian. “Very well,” he said. “No theatrics. I agree. I told you I would be straight up with you and as you can see, I came to you with this immediately.”

“Who was that man?” asked Karpov? “How did he get here—aboard *Kazan*?”

“*Kazan* was in the Atlantic when it last vanished—shifted. Apparently, it went forward again, as far as 2021.”

“So that is where they met Kamenski. My... How would he know about any of this?”

“Good question,” said Fedorov. “He’s a very mysterious man, but very insightful. When I was driven half-crazy trying to sort through this time

travel business, it was Kamenski who helped me make sense of things.”

“But I don’t see how,” said Karpov. “Yes, he was Deputy Director of the KGB for many years, but now he seems privy to events that no man on earth should be able to fathom. How it is he can claim to know what the long-term consequences of our presence here will be?”

“Perhaps he’s already seen it,” said Fedorov. “Frankly, I’m beginning to think he may not be from our own time line—not native to 2021, in spite of the fact that he had a long, distinguished life line in our time.”

“What? Then where in god’s name did the man come from—mars?”

“You don’t have to ask me that,” said Fedorov. “I think he may have come from a future time—beyond 2021. How else could he possess the insight he has? He knew about the effects of massive detonations on the time continuum, and he was deeply involved in the black operations that were masked by our nuclear test program. I think he may even have known about Tunguska. It’s clear that he’s been operating on many levels here, for on more than one occasion he’s told me that he holds the recollection of lives lived from more than one meridian of time.”

“Just like we do,” said Karpov. “You’ve got a few versions of yourself locked away up there, don’t you? As for me, the two lives I seem to have lived in this little adventure remain incarnate—one in my head, and one in my brother’s. I have no idea what my brother was doing three days before he went to see with *Kirov*. Oh, I can take a good guess, but I have no clear memory of that.” Karpov pointed to his head. “Not up here.... And my brother knows nothing of what we did the first encounter—at least he did not have this awareness the last time we spoke, and that was only yesterday. So while you and Volsky may be a salad bowl of different selves, my head is uncontaminated by these layers from other lives. Better that way. I think more clearly. Yet your theory holds some merit. Kamenski knows entirely too much—if the man is to be believed.”

“Why would he lie?”

“Lie? What exactly has he said, Fedorov? Just what is this great doom he warns about?”

“It obviously has to do with the ship—this ship. I suppose it did originate with the warning the Watch received from the future.”

“You’re speaking of this Fairchild woman now—the one on the converted British destroyer?”

“Correct. I can’t recall whether we’ve discussed it, but here’s the gist of things. When we first appeared, we ended up tangling with the Royal Navy—never a good idea, but you seemed to think you would prevail.”

“I would have beaten them easily enough.”

“Yes, with special warheads. Let’s not get into that now. What we do know is that Admiral Tovey’s experience in those encounters caused him to establish a secret group within the Royal Navy—the Watch. They were to look out for any further reappearance of our ship. Some of the original members were Tovey, Alan Turing, who was instrumental in concluding we were not from their own time, and other key Admirals like Cunningham and Fraser. I’m not aware of others. In any case. That group persisted into modern times—even in our own day. Fairchild was a member in our own time.”

“Indeed? How very strange. You realize what this means? If that is the case, then the British must have known.... Why, they must have *known* that *Kirov* would go missing in the Norwegian Sea—but how?”

“Now we get to the interesting part,” said Fedorov. “Fairchild claims they received messages while at sea. They were cryptic at first, and they came in over a series of time—intended to establish credibility on the part of the sender. One predicted the events of 9/11 for example. Another was data from the stock market received well before the given day, and the numbers tumbled into position when that day arrived—exactly.”

“Interesting. I suppose that’s just a bit like our telling these people here what they were about to do next.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “At least in the beginning. Now this war is so skewed that I can’t easily predict anything that might happen next.”

“Alright, Fairchild is a member of the Watch, and she gets messages from the future.”

“Correct—about us. In fact, they were warnings—beware a ship, beware *Kirov*. Then those future voices go silent.”

“Very dramatic,” said Karpov. “So now you think Kamenski may have been sent back somehow to reinforce that point. That’s the essence of his beef—beware *Kirov*.” He waved his hands in a mocking way. “And what I think this comes down to in the end is quite something else—beware Karpov. Isn’t that what Kamenski is really saying? After all, the ship is just a hunk of steel and other exotic materials. Without me, or someone else at the helm, it

just sits there.”

“I suppose you have a point with that.”

“Of course I do. If you or Volsky were in command here, would Kamenski be all in a tither about it? No.”

“I would not be so sure about that,” said Fedorov. “After all, Volsky was in command all through the operations in the Med, and I was Captain as well. You were not in charge the first time we hit the Pacific. It wasn’t until you displaced after the Demon volcano that things got really warped.”

“Yes, and you and Volsky had to come chasing after me and spoil things. Did Kamenski put you up to that?”

“It was my doing—I’ll admit it. I convinced the Admiral that we had to intervene. But I did consult Kamenski, and he came with us on *Kazan* the first time.”

“Riding shotgun,” said Karpov. “Alright, what is this great doom Kamenski is worried about? Are we going to hatch another plan here to try and save the world? You saw how that worked out at Ilanskiy.”

“You heard the Admiral. Kamenski is convinced our contamination of the timeline here will be fatal if we remain. He wants all of us to return to our own time—you, me, the ship, Volsky on *Kazan*, Fairchild on *Argos Fire*, that Japanese destroyer, and all the rest. We must remove any contaminate from this meridian, or face the consequences.”

“What consequences? What did Kamenski say would happen?”

“I’m not certain. Volsky said he could feel it, almost like a man who senses the impending edge of an event that has not yet come to pass. But we should already know the danger we pose here. We both faced it once already—Paradox.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “That was somewhat harrowing, but as you can see, the world did not end. Here we sit, Fedorov.”

“True, this world did not end, but it has been horribly twisted—Stalin dead, our homeland fragmented into three warring states, Ivan Volkov and Orenburg allied with Germany, Moscow burned. God only knows what else will happen before this war ends.”

“Yet you and I have gone over this time and again. I thought we had agreed that our only course was to win here—set things right with force of arms, not some arcane magic worked out on that back stairway at Ilanskiy. Now Volsky rises from the dead with another of these trumped-up crusades,

this time spawned by Kamenski.”

“Well,” said Fedorov, “what if our theory is correct? What if Kamenski is from a time beyond our own? From that perspective, he could have seen the outcome of all these events.”

“Then why the cloak and dagger?” Karpov waved his hand. “Why all the melodrama? Why doesn’t the man just come out and make things plain?”

“Who knows? Maybe that would even make things worse. After all, we faced the same dilemma ourselves when we appeared here. Once the locals came to believe who we really were, they naturally wanted to learn what we know.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “Who could resist looking into a magic mirror that would show him the future?”

“Correct,” said Fedorov. “We held a piece of that mirror, though our vision was far from complete. In many ways, Ilanskiy was also a way to see that future, and Sergei Kirov acted as he did because he went up those stairs to see Stalin’s world.”

“So which one would you prefer to live in, Fedorov? What do you think will happen here if we all take a bow and remove ourselves from this time? Is this world going to transform itself back into the one that led to the building of this ship?”

“Who could know that?”

“You seem to think Kamenski does. He’s so insistent that we do this, and your little theory on his true point of origins cements your belief in the man. Now you want to use that like a whip to compel me to do as the Director suggests, and if I don’t agree, Volsky is out there on *Kazan*. Well, we saw how that went down before in 1908. Do you honestly think I’ll let that goddamned sub get anywhere near this ship now?”

“But sir... How can you dismiss Kamenski’s warning? How can we dismiss the warning Fairchild reported—from our own future?”

“Yes, yes, very cryptic. Beware a ship... beware *Kirov*. Well, Mister Fedorov, the first part of that warning might obviously be aimed at us, but the second part might refer to Sergei Kirov himself—the man, not this ship. We came to that same conclusion ourselves, didn’t we, only we both lost our nerve and could not bring ourselves to kill the man in 1908. That would have certainly reset the pieces on the board. Yes?”

“Didn’t you do that for selfish reasons?” Fedorov accused. “You want to

carve out your own little empire here, and all those ambitions are thinly masked by a veil you've taken from Mother Rodina—all this talk of defending the homeland and taking back what is rightfully ours. That's why you've been hounding the Japanese, correct?"

"And why not? God cast Satan into hell, and so he decided to get as comfortable there as he could. What do you think will happen if we do as Volsky wants? Let's assume I kiss the two of you on the cheek and we form a nice little alliance here. We have no way of knowing whether these control rods will take us forward, but for the sake of discussion, let's assume they do. We get *Kirov* and *Kazan* back to 2021. How does *Argos Fire* get there?"

"They have the means," said Fedorov without disclosing anything more.

"Very well, what about all your friends in the desert that have been Rommel's bane these last few years?"

That got Fedorov, as he did not know all the details of what had happened at Tobruk. Karpov saw him hesitate, and went on. He already knew about the strange event at Tobruk. Tyrenkov's network was very good, but he continued.

"Assume all those toy soldiers get put back in the box. As for *Takami*, I'll find that damn ship and simply blow it to hell. Then all we have to do is find the replenishment convoy ships and wire them up for a shift to 2021. Yes?"

"It would probably be better to simply destroy them all," Fedorov put in. "and take the crews aboard our ships."

"Alright, now comes the clincher. How in God's name do we get Ivan Volkov to go along with our little plan? Oh, excuse me, Mister General Secretary, but we've a ticket for you on the next plane to 2021? You see how thorny this rose is?" Karpov smiled. "Don't you see how fruitless and futile Kamenski's plan is?"

Fedorov was silent. When it was only *Kirov* and *Kazan*, the task they had before them seemed a doable thing. Now Karpov had laid out the cold logic of it all. Even if they could remove *Takami* and Kinlan and all the other ships, there was still Ivan Volkov to deal with. Karpov pressed his advantage.

"We leave, and then Volkov rules the roost. You're already worried that the Allies could still lose this war. Well, if they do, it won't be here in the Pacific. Japan loses here whether or not I beat them senseless. The American Navy will not be defeated, not unless the Axis finds a way to shut down US production sites. No, if the Allies lose, it will be because Russia is defeated,

and right now, this very minute, Ivan Volkov is doing everything in his power to see that that happens. In fact, I would go so far as to say that our little club, you, me, and Volsky, are the only real counterfoil to Volkov's tampering here. If we leave, let me tell you what is likely to happen. Sergei Kirov has managed to hold on this long, but Volgograd will fall soon, and the Soviet Winter Offensive of 1942-43 has already run out of steam. This year the Germans go for Leningrad."

"I'll admit I hadn't thought about all of this," said Fedorov. "But Kamenski might be able to sort it through—once we get home."

"No, Fedorov, he won't, because home may not even be there from what I've already seen. Yes, I'll let you in on a little secret. As you know, that stairway at Ilanskiy goes both ways. Well I took a little stroll one day—and I went *up* instead of down. In fact, I got back to 2021 just in time to see the show, like a man slipping into the theater after the movie has already started. You know what I saw from the upper landing of that stairway—a mushroom cloud over Kansk."

Karpov let that sit there, and neither man spoke for a good long while. Then he inclined his head and continued. "Let me tell you a little joke from that American comedian: 'A guy walks into a psychiatrist's office and says, hey doc, my brother's crazy! He thinks he's a chicken. Then the doc says, why don't you turn him in? Then the guy says, I would but I need the eggs.' Well Fedorov, we can get all our chickens lined up here, but you've forgotten one of the eggs. You see, Kamenski aside, you and Volsky haven't really thought any of this through—but I have. I ran all this through the mill long ago, before I made my decision to stay here and fight. But giving you the benefit of every doubt, suppose we even hatch a mission to kidnap Ivan Volkov and get him home with us, or kill him instead. There's still one egg that's fallen from the nest, and you have no idea where it is—Orlov."

Part XII

As You Like It

*“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...”*

— **William Shakespeare:** *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII

Chapter 34

Orlov... Where the hell was Orlov, thought Fedorov? One moment he's right in front of me on that staircase, the next moment he's gone. Why? Where did he go? I just haven't had time to try and sleuth that all out in the history. It was only sheer luck that I stumbled upon that journal entry he wrote that so clearly gave me a time and place for him. To do that again, I would at least need a better vantage point on the history. I won't be likely to turn up anything here in the 1940s—unless he reappears here and makes his presence known somehow. I'm relying on Tyrenkov for that.

Think!

"If Orlov did appear somewhere, it would have to be beyond the year 1908, because we were going up the stairway when he vanished."

"Logical enough," said Karpov.

"Alright... We also know that there seems to be linkage to your point of origin when shifting through a fissure like that. I don't know how it works, but perhaps you still harbor some residue, or even a vibration on the quantum level that associates you with a given period in time. All I know is that every time I traveled that stairway, I was returned to the time and place I was before. That's how I got back here safe and sound, along with Troyak and all the Marines I had with me."

"But not Orlov," said Karpov. "Why is he an exception to the rule? I suppose it doesn't surprise me on one level. Orlov was a loose cannon."

"Yet he would get somewhere," said Fedorov. "In fact, he should have reached the top of that stairway—the upper landing on the 2nd floor, but perhaps at a different time."

"He hasn't shown up since you arrived," said Karpov. "I've had men posted there round the clock, and my brother has ringed that inn with three concentric circles of security. Speaking of him, there's another little fly in your ointment. How could both my brother and I shift forward together? I'm willing to bet that was never considered by this Kamenski either."

"I'm beginning to see your point," said Fedorov, still thinking about Orlov. "What if he went much farther forward. We already know he can't reach a time where he already exists, and he's been here since the ship

arrived in late July of 1941—the Second Coming.”

He remembered trying to explain that to Tyrenkov when he asked him to keep his ear to the ground for any sign of Orlov... *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...*

“And as I told you, Orlov remembers the first arrival as well. I asked Tyrenkov to use his intelligence network to look for him. Any luck with that?”

“Not yet,” said Karpov. “This argues that he’s ahead of us in the chronology, correct?”

“That would be my best guess,” said Fedorov. “But where? We won’t be able to discover anything about his whereabouts from here if that is the case. Everybody leaves an impression on history—everybody. The record glorifies some, deprecates others, but we all leave a mark somewhere. To search for evidence of his existence and whereabouts, we would have to reach a time beyond the one where he arrives. That is, at least, one more argument for moving forward now, and not remaining here.”

“Perhaps,” said Karpov. “I wouldn’t worry too much about Orlov just yet. As you say, he’ll blunder in sometime, and probably fall right into my security on that upper landing one of these days. Forget about him. We’ll eventually apprehend him, but that still won’t solve all our other problems, getting everyone else forward with us, including Ivan Volkov.”

“No... I suppose it won’t.”

“So you see, trying to run off on another wild bear hunt for Orlov is yesterday’s news, Fedorov. We’ve already done that, and trying to do it again won’t bag us Volkov. Frankly, the only way we’ll get to him will be in the here and now. He’s the real threat. Mark my words. Tyrenkov has already discovered that he is passing plans for advanced aircraft designs to the Japanese, including assistance for their Okha Rocket program. He knows the entire future, at least as it was once written. So he knows how and why Japan loses. What if he starts assisting other weapons programs? What if he tries to give Tojo, or God forbid, Adolph Hitler, the bomb?”

“I see your point,” said Fedorov. “We could still try to get to him by other

means.”

“Ilanskiy? We’ve been over that. If we eliminate Volkov in 1908, assuming we could even find him there, then who knows what happens to this time line? With him gone, there’s no Orenburg Federation, and time would then have to reset everything here, millions of individual fate lines. It would bring everything down like the twin towers.”

“We visualize that as utter chaos and catastrophe,” said Fedorov, “but it might not happen that way. If Mother Time was kind enough to allow us to keep our heads full of the things we’ve done here, we might simply wake up one morning and find ourselves in a completely different world, a different meridian of time, a different war.”

“But not the one from your history books,” said Karpov. “We’re too far off course to ever get that back, particularly with Sergei Kirov doing what he did to Josef Stalin. You see, none of this matters. We can shuffle the deck any way we please here, have it any way you like it, and it will simply be a new arrangement of things, a different set of cards to play out—but play them out we must. You were so dead set on restoring things to accord with your history in the beginning, but that was just another poker hand, the same as this one.”

“But it was the original time line,” said Fedorov.

“Was it?” Karpov smiled. “A moment ago you told me that this Elena Fairchild was a member of the Watch, the group Admiral Tovey founded to look for us. Well now, that ship was right there in 2021, the same year and time line where we were when *Kirov* first sortied. In fact, it was headed for the Black Sea while I was in the Pacific fighting with Captain Tanner and the American 7th Fleet. So how could she be a member of the Watch, and getting predictions about 9/11? That group wasn’t founded until we shifted back.”

Fedorov raised both eyebrows this time. “Well by that time we *had* already shifted back, and then returned to Vladivostok. So our history was already influenced by the things we did in the past on that first loop. Yes, Tovey did establish the Watch, and that had to be one of the effects that migrated forward.”

“You’re saying that this Miss Fairchild was just minding her own business, herding her little oil tankers around for love and profit, and then one day she wakes up and realizes she is now a member of this nefarious group? She realizes that she is privy to everything we did in the past? That may be

so, but I think otherwise. I'll bet that if you asked her whether she was in this group on the day we sortied, she would affirm that. If so, that can mean only one thing: *that meridian was already altered.*"

"What? But how? Who could have caused it?"

"I don't think our disappearance may have been the first instance of travel through time, it may be that we did all this before; perhaps many times before. Who can say?"

"Then why don't we remember those instances. You and I remember the first loop, and here we are in the second. If there was anything prior, why wouldn't we remember it?"

"Who knows, Fedorov? I could come up with many reasons. Perhaps the ship went back earlier, but did not survive. Dead men don't have memories. It may be that someone else is responsible—someone else moving in time."

"That's a rather ominous assumption."

"Possibly. All I'm saying is this. If the Watch existed before we first left Severomorsk, then it did so because that sortie was not the first. You can say that Fairchild just suddenly realizes she's a Watchstander, but I think otherwise. So you see? If I'm correct, then the world we were living in wasn't even the original history. All your books were already altered, even though you believed them to be the gospel truth. The deck had already been shuffled. That's a little humbling, isn't it? There we were, thinking we were the founding fathers for all these changes, and all the effort to set things right was for naught. What if that world was just one of many? What if this loop business has been going on for some time, and our recollection can only go back so far, perhaps one or two loops? After all, there's only so much room in your head."

Fedorov did not quite know what to make of that. His theory may have been correct, but Karpov made a good point. Taking his view, it really didn't matter what they did here. Things would resolve one way or another. Yet something in him still resisted the very presence of the ship and crew here, displaced in time, aliens, weeds blown in to infest the Devil's Garden. Seeing things the way Karpov did seemed to resolve one of any responsibility for that. Karpov simply saw himself as one more agent of change, just like the Demon Volcano, or Krakatoa, or any of the other key players on this stage.

Yes, all the world was a stage, and from Karpov's view, you could do anything here. You could remake this world to fit any guise, just as you like

it. Oh, he had his ambitions, like that soldier Shakespeare wrote of... *“Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, Seeking the bubble reputation, Even in the cannon’s mouth...”* And I have taken many a strange oath myself, thought Fedorov.

“So what will it be here?” he said at last. “What will we do? Volsky is out there, with Gromyko and *Kazan*. What do we tell them?”

“That should be obvious,” said Karpov. “I have already shown you the futility of trying to gather up all our chess pieces, quit the game, and simply go home. What will we find there but yet another war? Here I keep this strange unspoken tryst with the Americans, only because they are the enemy of my enemy. Yet one day I must face them too. One day...”

“You’ve already done that,” said Fedorov, “in 1945, and again in 2021. Yet you know if you use *Kirov* to help crush Japan, you will eventually face them again. You’ll get a wink and a nod after the war, but little thanks. MacArthur will want to set up shop in Japan and establish himself as the new Pacific Emperor here, and by the time all this gets around to that, another two long years, how many missiles will you have left?”

“A very good point,” said Karpov. “But I have another little mission in mind myself, now that you mention it.”

“A mission? What kind of scheme could you possibly be hatching now, Karpov?”

“Nothing all that dangerous to these little people here—until the mission succeeds. In fact, now that Admiral Volsky is here, he could help out a good deal.”

“In what way?”

“His authority is good for nothing here, but in 2021, he still has considerable clout. I thought about trying to use the stairway at Ilanskiy for this, but it’s of limited use. Even though the Naval Armory is right there at Kansk, and just south of Ilanskiy, a Moskit II weighs over six tons. There would be no way to use that old stairway.”

“You’re keeping me in suspense. What is this all about?”

“You said it yourself, just a minute ago. How many missiles will I have left by the time I conclude these affairs? I’ll need power if I am to enforce my will in the post war world, and yes, I’ll probably have to face down the Americans.”

“That did not go so well in 1945,” said Fedorov. “And you even had the

Admiral Golovko and *Orlan* with you.”

“True, but now I have *Kazan*. That boat is worth more than both those other ships.”

“That’s a pretty bold conclusion to jump to. We haven’t reached any decision here yet, and Volsky and Gromyko will both have to weigh in on anything we present to them.”

“Four votes? That won’t do,” said Karpov. “Who would break the tie, my brother?”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself—but first, tell me what you’re scheming on.”

“Missiles, Fedorov, missiles. I’ll be needing refills soon. That little scrap I had with the *Takami* forced me to expend thirteen SSMs, and a good many SAMs. I may have to use more to sink that damn ship, and I want to replenish.”

“But that’s impossible,” said Fedorov. “This is a come as you are party, Karpov.... Unless... Are you thinking to get more missiles from *Kazan*?”

“You and Volsky did that before, yes?”

“I don’t think Gromyko will be so generous this time. He’s been given a mission here as well, and one you may not like if we can’t reach an agreement.”

“Then I have another idea,” said Karpov. “First we’ll come to some accord here. Surely Volsky and Gromyko will understand what we’ve just determined. Trying to purge the contamination now is simply impossible. We have no other choice but to remain here, work our will upon this war, and bend it to an outcome that we can all agree upon as favorable.”

“Favorable for who? Right now, we may see Tojo, Hitler and Volkov as the enemies we must defeat, but something tells me that if we do accomplish that, then you’ll be lining up new enemies.”

“Only if they make an enemy of me,” said Karpov. “As to my idea, let me run it by you and see what you think.”

Chapter 35

“I want to see if I can retrieve more missiles from our own future.”

“What? With *Kirov*? You were planning a shift?”

“No, not with *Kirov*. I can’t take a risk like that. You yourself know that. Isn’t this what Kamenski is so worried about? He’s afraid the ship will shift again, not forward, but backwards to a time before its first arrival. He’s afraid it will start this whole paradox hour thing again and create this insoluble time loop. I suppose he has a point, but I’ve already told you that I could care less about that. The future can be damned as long as I have the present, and the thought that I could live it over and over again, indefinitely, remembering the events that transpire in each loop, is very appealing. What was that American movie where that happened? Ah—Groundhog Day.”

“Do you realize how incredibly selfish that attitude is?”

“Let’s not start leveling fingers, Fedorov. There’s plenty of blame to go around for all of us. In any case, I was thinking to try and get some men to 2021, load a replenishment ship, and then try and move it back here. I like what you said earlier about this affinity to one’s point of origin during these shifts. That gives me hope that this ship might get back here safe and sound, and laden with munitions and supplies, spare equipment, the works.”

“I see.... So you can continue ripping up the history here.”

“You mean continue *rewriting* that history. Remember, we’ll never put this puzzle back together again as it was. I thought you understood that. You yourself pointed out my dilemma. I’ll need power after this war ends—power to prevent the Americans from throwing their weight around as we both know they will. I’ve seen fit to be their ally here, but I want to be in a position where they cannot simply discard me and impose their will on the world.”

“Which is to say that you want to be sure we get the Cold War after this one ends.”

“If need be. I won’t be marginalized, Fedorov. Nor will I let them patronize me. When I’m finished here, I intend to reunite the Free Siberian State with Soviet Russia—yes, the Soviet Union will live again. Isn’t that the inherent imperative surrounding this ship? *Kirov* was born of that union. The

Soviet State must arise to give birth to this ship. Can't you see that my aims are very much aligned with yours? Only then might we see the wounds on the face of this history heal and reach a point where we might recognize it again. You see, we both really have similar goals. I just go about it by taking action, here and now. You want to sit there and think about it until your head spins. The world is still turning, Fedorov. It hasn't come to an end. Each second that passes takes us to a future that we build, moment by moment. It may not be the one Kamenski might prefer, but it will arise. I can guarantee you that, because I intend to build it myself, just the way I like it. Let's stop all this speculation and get out there and do something about it."

The world was certainly still spinning, thought Fedorov. But which world were they really trying to mend now? One thing Karpov said earlier kept sticking in Fedorov's head.... *"I don't think our disappearance may have been the first instance of travel through time."*

He thought about that, feeling deep down that it was true. No, it was more than a feeling. The more he thought about it, the more he came to believe it had to be the case. The evidence was right there before him, all along. First off, there was this strange Commander Wellings who appeared on HMS *Rodney*, and who later turned out to be an American physics professor, Paul Dorland. He knew that man had developed a detailed theory of time travel, chapter and verse, complete with a lexicon of terminology to explain it.

Then there was Kamenski.... Fedorov was already beginning to think he may not be native to the timeline in 2021, that he might even be a man from some future time. He was a Keyholder, that much is certain, and he claimed to have the Master Key, the one he left on the nightstand before he unaccountably vanished aboard *Kirov*.

The keys were the deepest part of this whole mystery—seven keys. Professor Dorland claimed that some had carefully machined serial numbers that corresponded to coordinates. That was why they had sought to save the *Rodney*, for that key had once been in the possession of Dorland himself. In fact, he claimed to find in on some odyssey involving the German battleship *Bismarck*.

So yes, there were other travelers in time. *Kirov* was not the first. And considering that these keys were all hidden away as they were, the question of who put them there leapt to the forefront. Who made them?

He had come to the conclusion that they were made in the future, yet the

key they sought on the *Rodney* had been first found embedded in the base of the Selene Horse, an artifact of ancient Greek sculpture. Kamenski never really stated exactly how he came by the key he possessed. Fairchild told him the key that led her to Delphi had simply been delivered to her, and that she knew of at least one other key, though she could not say who possessed it.

Now he came to feel that all of Karpov's assertions and suspicions were somehow wrapped up in the mystery of these keys, and connecting the dots in his mind, he suspected they all had something to do with the Tunguska Event. That impact was largely ignored around the time it occurred. It produced quivering lines on some seismic equipment, painted the night skies with eerie light as far away as London, and generated a few headlines in world newspapers, but little more was ever known of it until Leonid Kulik's expedition in 1927, more than two decades later. There was much speculation and research done after that, yet none of it discovered that vortex they had run into aboard the *Novosibirsk*, at least not on the meridian I first came from, he thought.

It is very clear that this meridian is quite different, perhaps irretrievably different. He sighed, thinking that everyone seemed to be working at cross purposes. Fairchild seemed to be intent on ferreting out those other missing keys. In fact, the box she found at Delphi had clearly been engineered to hold all seven. Why? Was it meant that they should all be gathered there?

Thinking about that, Fairchild had used that box to move her entire ship in time, and then asserted that the hunt for the key aboard *Rodney* must have been the reason for that. So her key would lead *Argos Fire* to a place where she might find another. Interesting. And she had that mysterious box where they could all be collected together.... Then what?

The prevailing wisdom was that these keys secured hidden doors that protected time fissures created by the Tunguska event. Those doors were all locked, so why would it be necessary to gather all the keys into one place—into that box, where a clever recess was embedded in a hidden drawer to hold each one. Was that just for safekeeping, or did it have some other purpose?

All these things went round and round in his head, as confusing as they were helpful. He had only a part of this puzzle, but somehow, he thought the quest for these keys would reveal much more. Yet Kamenski seemed convinced that it could not be *Kirov* that would undertake that quest. They had to go home, but how could they do so while still leaving Volkov here, let

alone Orlov?

“Well?” Karpov pressed him. “What’s it going to be, Mister Fedorov? Are you siding with Volsky and Gromyko on this? Will you stand with me? Help me convince them that we simply cannot leave here, not now, not yet; not while there is so much left undone, and Volkov is at large here.”

Fedorov shrugged, his eyes on the desktop, heart heavy as he realized Karpov was correct. They could not leave now—at least not without dealing with all the other loose ends that would be left behind, and chief among them was Ivan Volkov.

“What could we do about him?” he said slowly. “Is there any way we could get to him?”

Karpov smiled. “Ah,” he said. “Assassination? Don’t think I haven’t considered that. He’s very well protected. Believe me, I captured his Chief of Security during one of those Zeppelin raids he staged at Ilanskiy. In fact, I almost bagged Volkov himself. This man, Kymchek, has been very cooperative in revealing the security layers Volkov has around him. Remember, Volkov was a Captain in Russian Naval Intelligence, so he’s very clever; very cautious. Could we get to him with an expert marksman... Perhaps. It would certainly be worth a try. Historians probably wondered why no one could take out Hitler. Oh, they tried, but there must have been countless opportunities where a man with a rifle might have changed the course of WWII.”

“Alright,” said Fedorov. “I’m convinced that we just can’t pull up anchor and take a risk shifting now with *Kirov*, and I think I can convince Volsky and Gromyko as well.”

“Excellent!” said Karpov. “Now you’re talking. I had hoped you would see reason, and you did not disappoint me.”

“Hold on. Let me finish. Yes, you’ve convinced me we cannot simply leave—at least not now. We’ll have to see to all the other loose threads here first, and get them resolved. Some of the work has already been done. There was a brigade of modern British troops that fell through in southern Egypt. I was there when it happened.”

“Tyrenkov got wind of that,” said Karpov. “Yet we don’t have the details. Fill me in.”

“It occurred when Russia targeted the BP facilities at Sultan Apache in southern Egypt. As we both know, a nuclear event can rupture time, and it

certainly did, but for a reason that I have yet to disclose.”

“Still keeping secrets?” said Karpov, wagging a finger.

“It comes back to Tunguska—all of it,” said Fedorov. “You remember that mission I ran against Ilanskiy?”

“Certainly. That wasn’t very sporting of you, Fedorov. It took me nearly a year to rebuild that railway inn and staircase.”

“Sorry, but I was possessed with the thought that Ilanskiy represented a grave threat. It still does. Only our restraint has prevented us from doing something catastrophic. Well... On that mission, we got lost in a storm, and were hovering low looking for clues to get back on course. Orlov was down in a sub cloud car and he saw something on the tundra below. We stopped to investigate, and found it was just one of those cauldron sites that they tell stories about back home.”

“Ah yes,” said Karpov. “The mysteries of Siberia. It’s all nonsense.”

“Not quite,” said Fedorov. “Orlov found something there, and I think it was a fragment from the Tunguska Event. He had it with him when we were in the desert, and very near the site of Sultan Apache when that incident occurred. I think that object had much to do with opening that fissure that sent the British 7th Brigade through from our time. Yet it’s irrelevant now. There was another incident at Tobruk. I learned that from Tovey when I contacted him on the secure radio set.”

“Yes, Fedorov. As long as we’re confessing things here, I was listening in on that conversation as well.”

Fedorov shook his head. “You certainly are devious, Karpov.”

“No more than you, Fedorov.”

“Very well, then you already may know that the Brigade, as they called it, is gone. That Tobruk event ruptured the continuum again, only this time I think something more got through—one of our own goddamned missiles. I’m not sure how it happened, but it did.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “You realize what that means, don’t you? That future Volsky is so keen on getting to may be up in flames when we get there, if we ever do.”

“I’ve certainly thought about that,” said Fedorov. “So Kinlan’s Brigade is gone, though a small force was not there when it happened. Churchill ordered it to the UK on the funnies—that’s what they call that replenishment fleet.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard this.”

“*Argos Fire* will leave voluntarily, and take on all the crews from the funnies, which will be destroyed here.”

“And I’ll handle *Takami*,” said Karpov. “Gromyko is also welcome to lend a hand.”

“That leaves only Volkov, so we need to seriously plan a mission to take that man out—not on the back stairway at Ilanskiy, but in the here and now. If you agree to that, commit your resources to it, then I think I can get Volsky and Gromyko to side with us.”

“Done,” said Karpov with a smile. “I’ve been planning it for some time, and now we can all pool our assets to see that it gets done.”

“Then that leaves us with Orlov,” said Fedorov.

“Yes... Orlov. That son-of-a-bitch is at it again, isn’t he? Why don’t you work on that problem. I’ll handle Volkov with Tyrenkov and my brother.”

That brought the last straw to Fedorov’s mind. “Now that you mention him,” said Fedorov. “I think that will be the final problem we’ll have to solve.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your brother... He can’t remain here either, and I have no way of knowing what might happen if the two of you try to shift forward.”

Karpov was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he looked Fedorov in the eye. “If we do this—shift forward—where in God’s name do you think we’ll end up? Did Kamenski talk about that?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but I think he meant for us to return to our native time—to 2021.”

“Yes, but which 2021—from which meridian? Will we arrive back on the time line where we first started? Will we reach the future we may be building now on this altered meridian? Was that where Gromyko shifted in from with Volsky? Did you hear what he said? Volsky has a third layer of memories in that old head of his. He said he was just sitting at his desk at Red Banner Fleet headquarters when he walked Kamenski. How could he be doing that, when we both know he was supposed to be aboard *Kirov*? That means that timeline was not the original one we came from. It was a *third* world.”

Fedorov nodded, thinking. “You may be correct,” he said slowly, still coming to grips with that thought.

“Of course I’m correct. I’m getting very good at this time business. So let’s explore this further. Was *Kirov* in that world along with Volsky? *Kazan*

was. Were you there? Zolkin? The rest of the crew? Is there another version of me there? Something tells me that Kamenski meant for us to return there, to that world, but how would that be possible if we are already there. Imagine it, Fedorov. If I'm already there, what would happen if two more versions of myself try to shift there. Don't you see? We can't simply shift off to that future. Time won't allow it. I'm all for rounding up all the other loose ends, but before we do anything more, we'll have to all huddle and figure all this out. There are too many unanswered questions. Agreed?"

Fedorov nodded. "That is certainly true. Alright. I'll stand with you, Karpov, on one condition. You agree that when we sort this out, you'll take the ship forward. Give me that, and I can get Volsky and Gromyko on board."

"You have my word, *Kirov* will go forward too. Now let's get busy, because we have a lot to figure out here. The first thing we need to do is coordinate with *Kazan*. Why don't you get back on the secure comm-link and allay Volsky's fears? Tell him you have my full cooperation. Then the four of us can arrange a meeting place to work out our plan. We'll figure out how we can get *Takami*, and then determine what to do about Orlov, not to mention my own little brother out there. Then, when we have our house in order, we'll settle affairs on Kamenski's plan for how we move forward."

Chapter 36

Yes Fedorov, thought Karpov with an inward smile. I'll take *Kirov* forward, but I didn't say *how* I would do that, did I? Kamenski has some grand scheme in mind, but he hasn't really explained how his plan would work. I'll have to see if Volsky knows anything more, and also learn about the world he came from—a third meridian, apparently branching off from these other two I've been caught up in.

Yes, I'll move forward... but I may just end up doing that the old-fashioned way, one day at a time. But I must be very cautious here at the outset. Beginnings are very delicate times. New alliances can be very fragile. They will be suspicious, and I must allay their fears and seem the perfect co-conspirator. *Kazan* is a very dangerous adversary. That said, if I cozy up to Volsky and Gromyko now, and pretend we're all one happy little family again, then I'll have every opportunity to put a torpedo into that sub and rid myself of that threat—but not before I squeeze as much juice out of that orange as I can.

Yes, *Kazan* has missiles, and maybe I can talk Gromyko out of a few. At the very least, perhaps I can get him to take out *Takami* for me. That way I won't have to expend any of my own missiles. Then I need to seriously consider my plan to fetch more ordnance from the future. That would be very dangerous. I suppose I could reinforce the stairway at Ilanskiy here with steel and concrete, and make it sturdy enough to allow for the movement of a missile weighing six tons. But I'd have to rig out a crane to lift them in the future, and then some kind of sled to move them down the stairs here. Even if I do reinforce it here, would that persist into the future? Could I reinforce it there? Would I have the time if the world there is on fire, as we both have already seen. It's just too uncertain. I have no way of knowing what happens between this moment and 2021, or what will be underway when my team reaches that year.

In fact, I have no way of knowing whether I could successfully get men there at all by using those stairs. My own security forces would have no point of origin in that future pulling them forward, so I would have to use members of the crew—perhaps something for Troyak and his Marines to do. I might

even have to send a control rod forward with them to move a ship with munitions back here. It's either that or I would have to find a working control rod in 2021. I already know they were manufactured in lots, so Rod-25 may have a doppelganger as well. If I could find one there, get it to that ship.... That's where Volsky could be useful. I'll certainly have to butter that man's bread for a while, even if it means saluting and calling him 'sir.'

Well, I digress. First I have to make certain I have this situation with Volsky and Gromyko under control. Only then might I have the luxury of working out these other plans. Perhaps I'll even give some more thought to my Omega Plan.

He smiled again. Yes, *Kirov* was the Alpha, but I will be the Omega. Interesting that Fedorov hasn't thought of this yet. He's all worried about those men from the future going silent. This is all the great mysterious cloud hanging over everything—this talk of a Grand Finality. Doesn't he realize what I have in my power now? I don't have to use *Kirov* to move in time. I have *Tunguska*, I have that vortex that Fedorov was kind enough to discover for me, and I have Ilanskiy. There are risks and uncertainties in all three, but Ilanskiy has been very consistent—old faithful.

This business about the keys is very intriguing. Clearly they were made in the future. Where else? That would be the only place where they would have had the time to discover the location of all these time rifts and then secure them. Well, Mister Fedorov, I have the means of solving that little riddle for you, and perhaps one day it will dawn on you—my Omega Plan.

Ilanskiy... Yes, that stairway goes *both* directions. I've already gone up once, and was so shocked by what I saw with that nuke over Kansk that I beat a hasty retreat and never went back. Suppose I tried that again, and then found some way to get to the main stairway once I got there. The second floor was damaged, probably from the shock wave when that nuke went off at Kansk, but I might be able to get over to the main stairway.

If I do, I just go down and then the real fun starts. I go right back into the dining room to the base of the back stairway. From there, it's only seventeen steps up to that dark future everyone is so worried about. Yes... I could go see what has silenced the lips of those men from the future—the key makers, as Fedorov believes.

How very interesting....

* * *

They were gathered around the ‘Thread Module,’ as Kelly was calling it now, and to all of them it seemed like the ‘Threat’ module would be a better name. It used to be called the Meridian Track, a large ultrawide flat panel display where the line of the continuum through history was displayed in a long horizontal bar that could be scrolled left or right. Colors indicated the integrity of that track to the history recorded and permanently stored in the Touchstone RAM Database. That was data that had been recorded and securely stored before the team ever attempted their first move in time, a record of the world as it was before anyone ever had the chance to tamper with the past.

The Golem module constantly monitored the Internet, sifting through millions of records, like a hundred thousand Google search bots. What they were looking for were changes and variations, anything that might indicate that something was amiss. If something was wrong, a change in the past significant enough to affect the history as it moved forward, those changes would ripple out, and the tiny outliers of that tsunami would be easily detected.

It might be something as simple as a birth or death record. Mrs. Smith was supposed to have given birth to three children, and now she had four. The Meridian Team called those uninvited guests ‘Zombies,’ the real walking dead, people who were recorded as being alive when they shouldn’t be; when they were never even born. Or John Doe’s record of birth goes missing, and no other evidence of his existence could be found—no driver’s license, social security, credit files, job, marriage or medical records. In that instance, the team called those missing souls “Wraiths.”

It wasn’t just people, though their individual fate lines could be very potent Pushpoints on the course of events. It was also the recorded history, as reported in every newspaper article, news item, or book stored in the data base, and it had damn near everything that had even been published, even scans of Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian tablets dating back millennia. If something were found that contradicted an existing record in the Touchstone Database, sometimes simply called the RAM Bank, it would be flagged by the system and the historical point on the continuum would change color.

Yellow would indicate a minor variation that invited investigation to

verify the find before being accepted. Amber was a more significant change that had turned up multiple references in discord with the RAM Bank, and that color deepened to burnt orange and then eventually went red as the violations and variations increased. When that line went black, the contradiction was so severe that it heralded chaos, a radical transformation of the meridian capable of altering all the history beyond that point.

But they had never seen *this* before.

There, as Nordhausen swiped at the touch screen to scroll the line left or right, they could clearly see what had happened. The first event recorded in this alert had occurred in 1908, and zooming in to that year, on June 30th, the most significant event in the recorded history was the fall over the Stony Tunguska River, where something mysterious exploded in a massive fireball that shook seismographs thousands of miles away, and lit the night skies with an eerie glow for days after.

There, in a long vertical column below that date, were links to every other event of any significance in the database. One could scroll down and down for hours on end, reading headlines of major news stories of the day, or finding something as trivial as the recorded news in the Salida Mail, Volume XXIX, Number 8, one of Colorado's oldest news journals. You could learn that Miss Cornelia Gregg and Miss Isla Harris drove down from Buena Vista last Sunday morning and spent the day visiting with their friends. Alas, Mr. Ned Paquette, while riding his horse to Poncha Springs to attend the ball game received injuries from his horse falling through a bridge, though he escaped death.

Such seemingly insignificant bits of trivia were not always found at the focus point of major changes on the continuum. The fate of Ned Paquette might not matter one wit to the world, then again, it might have mattered a very great deal, had he died in that little mishap when he was supposed to have survived it. Had that variation been found, Ned would have become a Wraith, and his name entered in to a special list that immediately triggered a genealogical search to determine who else was now missing on the branching tree of his offspring. Imagine Adolf Hitler's mother having such an accident before she gave birth to the man, and the point of this analysis becomes clear.

So it started at Tunguska, something as simple as a change in the arrival time of one of the teams participating in the Great Race; something as simple as a strange name in the guest register that wasn't there before. Fedorov and

others had surmised this was the origin of the disaster without the use of this elaborate tracking and reporting system. It started right there in Siberia, the mysterious impact striking the history like a stone hitting a mirror, and that very instant, a small crack appeared, aligned right along the back stairway at Ilanskiy.

Anton Fedorov heard the crack, for he was right there when it happened, albeit in 1942, some 34 years in the future. But he should not have been there at all. No. That sound should not have turned his head, a deep, ominous rumble that led him towards the upper landing of that staircase. No one should have heard it, or seen the odd glow emanating from the shadows of that stairwell. No one should have been curious enough to walk down those stairs that day.

The rest was history—an altered history of the world that never should have been written. But now the Meridian Team realized what had happened. The man who was there to hear that crack had come off a ship—*Kirov*—and that ship had slipped through another hole in time because of an arcane conspiracy between a nuclear reactor, a nuclear detonation, and a control rod containing exotic particles that had been mined from sites along the Stony Tunguska River. It was as if the event itself, the thing that came from the depths of space that day, was now trying to call home all the disparate particles it had shed with that terrible impact.

There at Ilanskiy, in that tumultuous hour, a man walked down those stairs to meet the man that christened his ship, and everything changed—everything.

Now the Meridian Team members hunched over the graphic display of those changes, awed by what they were seeing. It was something Dorland had predicted and provided for in the code that ran the display, but not something he ever thought he would see. The Meridian had split, not once, but twice, branching off to create new possible courses in the flow of time. The events caused by the coming of *Kirov* had been so catastrophic that time itself could not yet choose which of the three lines of fate it might rely on to become the Prime Meridian again, for there could only be one continuum in the end. Zooming and scrolling through the display, the team members found the ship, the officers and crewmen who sailed in it, and witnessed their exploits with utter dismay.

“My *God*,” said Paul. “Here we thought we had trouble sinking the

Bismarck as it was supposed to happen. Will you look at the carnage this ship has caused?”

“I don’t see any way we can get a handle on this,” said Maeve. “Look at that splintering! We’ve got three threads now. The Gamma thread is the one closest to the original in terms of overall integrity, but look, it’s already beginning to receive contamination from the other two. Beta thread is almost completely unrecognizable now, at least insofar as WWII is concerned. There is no way we could intervene to try and reverse all the changes there. How do we stop Germany from taking Gibraltar, or reaching Moscow as they did in that history? It’s impossible.”

“There might be Pushpoints out there somewhere,” said Paul, and he was very correct. Given enough time and research, they might have discovered the seemingly insignificant life of one Juan Alphonso, the engineer who stopped the leaky roof in a train car on the eve of a very important meeting. It was his little piece of cheesecloth that handed the Rock to Germany, though none of them knew that at that moment.

“You’re right, Maeve,” said Paul. “If it were just one variation, one battle or sinking like the *Bismarck*, then we might have a chance to correct it. But WWII is a maze of consequence. There must be thousands of Pushpoints driving these events. We’d never find and correct them all in a lifetime.”

“So we’ve got to ignore the history of the war,” said Nordhausen. “We’ve got to go further back—to the source—Tunguska.”

“How do you stop that?” said Kelly. “Isn’t that an imperative, an act of nature that we can do nothing about.”

“I once thought that,” said Paul, but look here in 1942 on the Beta thread—Krakatoa blew up!”

“Right,” said Nordhausen. “Scroll back to August 26, 1883 when it was supposed to erupt. There’s no sign of that event now—at least not on the Beta thread.”

“Damn amazing,” said Paul. “How do we get variations like this that change historical imperatives? I can see how the weather might change, but volcanic activity? That tells me that whatever happened to alter that meridian was so profound that it literally changed everything, even the pressure and buildup of the magma chamber beneath Krakatoa.”

“That’s damn odd,” said Maeve. “1883 predates the Tunguska Event in 1908. How could the latter affect the former in any way, shape or form?”

“Right,” said Nordhausen. “How could a suspected cause follow an effect?”

“Admittedly, its confounding in the classical physics of the macro world,” said Paul, “but not on the quantum level of things. Causality is the notion that events happening now in the present are caused by events in the past, the domino theory. Caslav Brukner’s team at the University of Vienna has already published research claiming that it is possible that a single event could be both a cause *and* an effect insofar as quantum mechanics is concerned. They call it ‘Quantum violation of causal order.’ We won’t get into it here, but it can happen. Bottom line: causal order might not be a mandatory property of nature, so that means my concept of an imperative event like that eruption is suspect.”

“I still don’t see how Tunguska in 1908 prevents Krakatoa from erupting in 1883,” said Nordhausen, “but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, because it clearly happened, at least in the Beta thread.”

“But not in the Alpha or Gamma threads,” said Maeve. “That’s our clue. I think nature is a completely random force. It’s like a coin toss. Yes, Krakatoa was going to blow, and on two tosses, it does so right on schedule in the Alpha and Gamma threads, but on the Beta thread it holds off another 59 years until 1942.”

“That’s really a blip in geologic time,” said Kelly.

“The two events may not even be related,” said Maeve. “It could just be random, as I have it. The only reason we notice it is because we have three threads now, and it doesn’t happen on our thread.”

“That could be,” said Paul, “but I’m not so sure. Was there anything prior to 1883 we need to look at—any variation of consequence?”

“We have some yellow around 1815—in Brussels.”

“What month?” asked Paul.

“June.”

“Waterloo.” Paul rubbed his chin, his eyes narrowing. “That’s one hell of a pivotal event. We’d better have a look at it. Anything else?”

“Something further back here,” said Nordhausen, swiping the screen to move into the 1600s. “September of 1687. That was General Morosini’s Army of Vienna attacking the Turks in Greece. It wasn’t there yesterday, but it is today.”

“What? You mean to say this just appeared?”

“Yup.”

“Damn,” said Paul. “That means we have backwash. The damage is migrating backwards as well as forwards on the continuum.”

“It could be more than that,” said Nordhausen. “Look at these other variation seeds. It could be a deliberate intervention, not just random backwash. I found another incident in 1802 off Greece; and another a little earlier in 1799—Egypt.”

“Very strange,” said Paul. “Did you research those?”

“You know me better than that,” said Nordhausen. “The incident in 1802 was most curious. It involved the Elgin Marbles; the sinking of the ship they were being loaded on—the *Mentor*. There was a diary page from a local that was different. Strangely, that relates directly to this incident I just picked up yesterday in 1687.”

That got Maeve’s attention, and she turned, very interested now. “How?” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“In 1687, General Morosini fought his battle with the Turks in Athens, at the Acropolis in fact, which was fortified by the Turks and used as a depot for their gunpowder. They didn’t think their enemy would attack it, because of its obvious historical significance, but they were wrong. Morosini had his cannon and mortars shell it for four days, and on that fourth day—*con fortunato colpo!* They got a lucky hit. It ignited the Turkish gunpowder, and blew the Parthenon to hell.”

“The Parthenon,” said Maeve.... “That was where the Selene Horse was before Lord Elgin pilfered it!”

“Quite correct—in 1802.... But there’s more. I can now connect all these pre-Tunguska variation warnings, all of them, the one in 1687, 1799, 1802, and finally that blip we picked up in 1815. I found a name associated with every last one of them. No one goes anywhere or does anything without leaving a mark on the history for someone like me to find.”

“Why didn’t you bring this up earlier?” Maeve gave him a wide-eyed look.

“Well you were all hot and bothered over this volcano business, so I waited that out, but look here—the name is Ames, Sir Rodger Ames. I find references to it at all those dates. In fact, such a man was aboard an English crewed *Pinco* at Athens and helped transport the Turkish Garrison to Smyrna after it finally surrendered to General Morosini.”

“Pinco?”

“A Genovese ship design, flat bottomed, about 300 tons; three masts with lateen sails, and very fast and maneuverable.”

“Quite strange,” said Maeve. “It obviously can’t be the same person. Those dates span 128 years.”

“That they do.... But just for yucks I ran that name and got some very curious references. One one stands out, because his name turned up in the log entries for visitors requesting special access to artifacts within the British Museum—this very year, in 2021.”

“What artifacts?” asked Maeve, very curious now.

“The Selene Horse, for one,” said Nordhausen, “which was in the Parthenon in 1687 when that lucky shot hit home, and was on board the frigate *Mentor* in 1802 when it sunk in a storm of Greece. Yes, I have a record of a man named Ames there as well.”

“Go on,” said Paul, his eyes riveted on the history Professor.

“It also turned up in the crew register of another sinking ship—the HMS *Rodney*. It was Able Seaman Roger Ames, a Stoker working the boiler rooms, so we can add 1942 to that list of dates.”

“So someone by that name keeps turning up at historical sites occupied by the Selene Horse,” said Maeve. “Anywhere else?”

“There was a Roger Ames appearing on the guest register of the ball General Wellington attended prior to the battle of Waterloo. That one seems odd.”

“And what was the other artifact this visitor looked at?”

“Ah, you’ll like this—the Rosetta Stone.... I found a reference to a man in the survey party with Napoleon—one of the intellectual savants that went over when the ‘Little General’ invaded Egypt. He was reported near the site where the stone was discovered. Ring a bell?”

“Good *God*,” said Maeve. “We were there, Robert, the two of us, right there in 1799 when the stone was discovered!”

“Yes, said Nordhausen. July 19th, 1799. Very suspicious. This one doesn’t seem to relate to the Selene Horse, but someone is certainly skulking about through all this history, and in dates far enough apart to mean it could not be the same person, *unless*...”

“Unless he was moving in time,” said Paul.

Silence. They all just looked at him.

“My dear Nordhausen.... Did you find out anything more about this fellow who visited the British Museum?”

“That I did. He also held a title in the British Peerage. He is Sir Roger Ames, the Duke of Elvington. Interestingly, I just found out that he had some business dealings involving a certain company—Fairchild Enterprises.”

“*The keys*,” said Paul. “It wasn’t the Selene Horse he was after, but that damn key hidden inside it! He didn’t get to it on the *Rodney*, so he went looking elsewhere. Lord almighty, someone get some coffee started. It’s going to be a very long night.”

The Saga Continues...

Lions at Dawn, Book 28 in the *Kirov Series*, returns to North Africa where Patton and Montgomery face off against a strong defensive front engineered by Kesselring and Von Arnim in Algeria. Meanwhile, Rommel displays flashes of his old brilliance as the British 8th Army continues to push into Tripolitania under General O’Connor. The two dashing armored champions will again meet in a swirling armored duel in the desert.

As the British settle back in to Gibraltar, Admiral Tovey receives a call from a most welcome old friend. Elena Fairchild orders a recon mission to the hidden recesses of St. Michael’s Cave where a discovery of profound importance is made. The Meridian Team also begins the hunt for a mysterious time traveling intruder who seems to be haunting the movement of the Selene Horse in a search for its hidden prize, one of the seven keys that might unlock the mystery discovered by Fairchild’s Argonauts.

APPENDIX

ORDER OF BATTLE – FIJI CAMPAIGN

Initial Japanese Landing: (Viti Levu)

Sakaguchi Detachment

- Kaneuji Bn
- Matsumoto Bn
- Yamoto Bn
- Ikume Bn
- Engineer Company

Yokosuka Combined Naval Infantry Brigade -V Adm Mikawa

- 1st Yokosuka SNLF Bn - Cmd Minoru Yano (Para)
- 2nd Yokosuka SNLF Bn – Cmd Kenichi
- 3rd Yokosuka SNLF Bn – Cmd Fukumi (Para)
- 4th Yokosuka SNLF Bn – Cmd Kushin
- 5th Yokosuka SNLF Bn – Cmd Yasuda
- 6th Yokosuka SNLF Bn – Cmd Matsuo

Main Landings:

38TH INFANTRY DIVISION: General Tadayoshi Sano

228th Regiment – Colonel Takeo Ito

- I Asano Bn.
- II Kamura Bn
- III Nishimura Bn

229th Regiment – Colonel Ryuzaburo Tanaka

- I Orita Bn
- II Masaru Bn
- III Kehmosu Bn

230th Regiment – Lt. General Toshinari Shoji

- I Egashira Bn.
- II Wakamatsu Bn
- III Kanki Bn

Follow up Landings:

48TH INFANTRY DIVISION – General Yuitsu Tsuchihashi

1st Formosa Regiment – Colonel Irufume Imai

2nd Formosa Regiment – Colonel Tohru Tanaka

47th Oita Regiment – Lt General Koichi Abe

Kitamura Cavalry Regiment – Lt Colonel Kuro Kitamura

Final Landings:

Kawaguchi Detachment – *35th Brigade*

124th Regiment – Colonel Akinosuka Oka

- I Koshuko Bn
- II Watanabe Bn
- III Tamura Bn
- IV Kuma Bn (Attached from 4th Div)
- Artillery Bn
- 1 AA Company
- Engineer Company

NOUMEA GARRISON:

Ichiki Detachment

- 1st Bn: Colonel Mizuno
- 2nd Bn: Colonel Kuramoto
- 3rd Bn: Colonel Goto
- Aviation Engineer Company

UNITED STATES & COMMONWEALTH**Opposing Initial Japanese Landings on Fiji: (Viti Levu)**

- 8th Fiji Brigade (NZ)
- 12th Fiji Brigade (NZ)

Arriving at Suva Bay, May, 1942

1st US Marine Division – General Vandegrift

- 1st Regiment – Col Cates

- 3rd Regiment – Col Hunt
- 7th Regiment – Col Webb
- 11th Artillery Regiment

Division Withdrawn to Pago Pago Dec 1942 except:

1st Marine Raider Bn – Col Edson (Retained on Viti Levu)

2nd Marine Raider Bn – Col Carlson (Retained on Viti Levu)

23rd “Pacifica” Division – General Patch

- 132nd Regiment
- 164th Regiment
- 182nd Regiment

25th “Tropic Lightning” Division – General Collins

- 27th Regiment
- 34th Regiment
- 35th Regiment

37th Infantry Division – (Vanua Levu) – Maj General Beightler

- 145th Regiment
- 147th Regiment (Attached to 23rd Div)
- 148th Regiment (Attached to 25th Div)
- 62nd Field Art Bde

2nd US Marine Division

- 2nd Marine Regiment (Retained on Viti Levu)
- 6th Marine Regiment (Floating Reserve)
- 8th Marine Regiment (Efate Landing)
- 10th Artillery Regiment
- 1st Marine Para Bn (Attached for Efate Landing)

NOUMEA LANDINGS: Jan 1943

41st Division – General Horace Fuller

- 161st Regiment
- 162nd Regiment
- 163rd Regiment

- Division Artillery & Engineers