Kirov Saga: 9 Days Falling

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Kirov Saga
Nine Days Falling
Volume I

By

John Schettler

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"Nine days they fell: Confounded Chaos roared,
And felt tenfold confusion in their fall
Through his wild anarchy, so huge a rout
Encumbered him with ruin: Hell at last
Yawning received them whole, and on them closed;
Hell, their fit habitation, fraught with fire
Unquenchable, the house of woe and pain."

—Milton, Paradise Lost

Kirov Saga ~ 9 Days Falling

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Author's Introduction

"If the facts don't fit the theory,
Change the facts."
—Albert Einstein

The Kirov Series as it is now conceived begins with the opening *Kirov* trilogy, which focuses on the long odyssey through time to the 1940s by the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov.* Book I covers action in the North Atlantic, Book II covers the Mediterranean, and book III the Pacific. The fourth book in the series, *Men Of War,* recounts what happened to the ship and principle crew members after their return to the year 2021. As such it is a kind of bridge novel that leads the story into the modern day presentation of the dreadful war in a second trilogy entitled *9 Days Falling.*

The crew of *Kirov* learned of this war, and how it was to begin, during their journey, and they came to suspect that their own actions in the past gave birth to the catastrophic future they discovered. The strange disappearance and sudden return of the battlecruiser were critical factors in igniting the tinder dry political situation in 2021, where an energy starved world gears up for the first great global conflict of the new century. At the end of book III, *Pacific Storm*, Karpov realizes that, in some other cycle of these events, he may have been the man who triggered the war by firing on the US submarine *Key West.* The main characters have all seen the awful consequences of this war on one blackened shore after another, but they soon realize in *Men Of War* that the dreadful fall of the dominoes continues. Karpov's dramatic rehabilitation and restraint has only bought the world a brief respite, and the conflict begins with another flashpoint over the Diaoyutai / Senkaku Islands.

With foreknowledge of where this conflict will lead and the power to travel to the past still within their grasp, the story's main characters take upon themselves a great task—to see if they can discover how to prevent the war from ever happening. When they learn that the surly Chief Gennadi Orlov is still alive in the 1940s, Fedorov is convinced that his presence there can do no good, and the deepening mystery and utility of "Rod-25" allows him to launch a daring mission to the past to try to find Orlov and bring him home. He will find much more than he bargained for, but all that lies ahead in the story, which brings me to my next thoughts.

These novels present an *alternate history* of events taking place in the 1940s, and a fictional depiction of a war taking place in the year 2021. The action in the past is also not in sync, on a day by day basis, with the action in 2021, as Fedorov notices that time seems to move at a different pace and does not respect our calendar. This effect was very obvious each time *Kirov* shifted to the past and returned to the dark future that was conceived by their actions. Things happen earlier or later than they might have, and sometimes they don't occur at all—like the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor that *Kirov's* action in the North Atlantic wipes from the history books.

The research involved in trying to make a story like this 'ring true' is considerable. It required discovery of the exact deployment of the Royal Navy on the date that *Kirov* appears in 1941, and then extended to the principle officers and even individual crew members and pilots on those ships.

Sun and moon data for all dates in the story were determined, and even prevailing weather data when I could find it. Navigation charts for all restricted waters were researched. All buildings, facilities, inns and street names on land settings were fished from the Internet. The placement of vessels in any given port, and shore batteries involved in the action are all accurate, except where I deliberately moved ships as a result of *Kirov's* actions. The capabilities of naval systems and weapons, their ranges, lethality and armor penetration were all calculated.

A former professional war game designer, I spent a lot of time simulating potential battle outcomes, and expenditure of *Kirov's* limited inventory of missiles and shells were tracked in every engagement, round by round. Flight time of missiles after launch and of aircraft on strike missions to determine time on target were also computed, sometimes down to the second. Naval ranks, uniforms, caps, insignia, call signs, codes, flags and procedures were also part of the research.

That said, while I have worked hard to give the novels a strong historical underpinning, I have also *changed* the history you may know as I craft this tale, and this was done deliberately to serve the story. In some ways the altered reality will be remarkably faithful in reflecting the real history, in other places dramatically different, like a cracked mirror. The big changes on the strategic level are quite apparent: the United States enters the war in August of 1941 and there is no attack on Pearl Harbor. Admiral Yamamoto adopts Yamashiro's plan and decides to strike south at Noumea and Darwin,

discarding the Midway operation. Yamamoto survives the war and is instrumental in persuading the Emperor to order the surrender of Japan. The war ends without the use of the Atomic bomb.

On the operational level the air attacks on Petsamo and Kirkenes and the planned landing at Dieppe are both cancelled, along with a number of other minor operations like Operation Agreement and the planned attacks against airfields on Rhodes. In the Atlantic, Admiral Tovey sorties with major elements of the Home Fleet on two occasions, and in the Med Operation Pedestal sees Syfret's Force X turn back hours early and involved in a major surface action with *Kirov*.

Ships sustain damage or are sunk by *Kirov*, and others are redeployed to deal with the threat the mysterious raider poses. *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* are not sent to the Pacific to be sunk by the Japanese as in our time line, and *Repulse* is instead sunk by *Kirov*, in the Atlantic while *Prince of Wales* survives the war. The US carrier *Wasp*, battleship *Mississippi*, cruisers *Quincy* and *Wichita*, and numerous destroyers are sent to Davey Jones Locker by *Kirov's* powerful offensive punch. The Italian Navy also takes a few hard lumps, and moves and deploys capital ships that otherwise were kept in more secure ports in response to *Kirov's* sudden appearance. German U-Boats figure prominently in the action at several points in the story, and some are compelled to change their patrol routes and tactics due to their interaction with *Kirov*.

Beyond these things, there are many other fine cracks in the mirror of history in this story. As Einstein suggested, I have changed the facts when they didn't fit the theory I was laboring to bring to life. Astute readers in the UK will quickly note that the story also references a "Queen" and not a "King" in the 1940s. Another wonders why I have a character address Churchill as "Sir Winston" when he wasn't knighted until 1953. This is intentional, as in this alternate history King George VI is killed when a bomb landed near a Buckingham Palace courtyard. The eldest daughter of King George, Elizabeth, ascended the throne as a minor, but given the fact that she was not of age the Regency Act of 1937 declared Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, as Regent. However she was Queen in name and fact, and much loved, even before she comes of age.

These changes were deliberate on my part, as were many other small details that I have given a Gaussian blur in the story. I think I have done a good job in placing the story in a historically sound setting in the 1940s, but

don’t expect a carbon copy. I have deliberately chosen to alter certain facts to serve plot elements that have yet to be revealed.

A good story and plot is a bit like a bathing suit—it reveals just enough to be interesting while concealing that which is essential. I cannot disclose, at this point, why I have made some of these seemingly minor changes, though anyone who has read my *Meridian* Series alternate history time travel novels will immediately know that I hold to a theory that fate and time turn at the whim of insignificant things.

Playing with the ‘facts’ is what makes alternate history fun, and these changes are deliberate threads I am weaving into the plot. Some are planned foreshadowing of events yet to come; others are clues or the seeding of new potential plot lines, or simply a way of making it apparent that something is amiss and the history has changed. They may stand out like a loose thread at first, but they are there for a reason. I haven’t slipped a stitch. The moment Wake-Walker’s task force diverts from its assigned mission to raid Petsamo and Kirkenes and begins to shadow *Kirov*, the chronology of historical events has been fatally altered. The year 1942 the ship returns to at the beginning of book II is therefore *not* the same 1942 that played out in the history we know.

Tovey and Turing spend a good deal of time trying to sort out the consequences of *Kirov’s* mysterious appearance, and I have also used the character Anton Fedorov to try and point out many of these historical changes to the other characters, and to you as readers. While I enjoy omniscient point of view on the story, and already know its beginning, middle, and end, Fedorov’s viewpoint is limited. There are things he does not yet know, and therefore things that you, gentle readers, will not yet know about what is to come.

After crossing the bridge I built in *Men Of War*, the series will now transition to this initial volume of *9 Days Falling*, a second trilogy that will present the first nine days of the war in 2021, with each volume covering three days time. Yet the story will continue to move back and forth between modern times and the 1940s, as you will soon see. All the major characters from *Kirov* will still be featured prominently in the action. I’ve grown too fond of them all to leave anyone behind. There will also be new plot lines here, and new characters, but they all are ‘common fated’ as the Tibetans might say. Each and every one of them has a part to play in how this story ends. There are some very startling and dramatic events ahead, and *Kirov* may again find itself in some very strange circumstances as in the opening

book, so I hope you will buy a ticket and take the ride.

Thank you all for reading this far in the series. Your intelligence and curiosity, and your knowledge of the history, are all key ingredients in making this magic formula work. It was your enthusiasm for this story that has inspired me to extend it through a full seven volumes and I am very grateful for your support as I present this next evolution of the *Kirov Saga – 9 Days Falling.*

Prologue

The helo swooped low over the site, the pilot aghast at what he was seeing. It was a British Petroleum ride, out from Port Fourchon in the Mississippi Region on an emergency rig tour after Hurricane Victor cut a swath through the production zone at sea. Thus far 15 platforms had sustained damage that would be at least a week in repair, perhaps longer. This was the last planned stop for the day, to the crown jewel in the joint BP-Exxon operation in the region. They were going out to *Thunder Horse*, the world's largest semi-submersible oil platform, so big you could put three football fields up on the topside area. It was fully submersible now.

"Look at that!" the pilot pointed at the badly listing platform. *Thunder Horse* was keeling over on her massive industrial orange flotation columns, and apparently still taking on water. It weathered, a blow from Hurricane Katrina years ago, and the last few brushes from the big storms never seemed to bother the immense platform—until now. The 650mm torpedo was a little more than the design engineers had ever planned for.

"What could have caused this?" The engineer aboard knew they had not suffered a direct hit from Victor this time. Yet the damage was plain to see. "Can you get a bit lower, I want to check the other side."

She was obviously floundering, and in very deep water, sitting right astride block 778/822 in the Mississippi Canyon, the bottom over a mile away, some 6300 feet below. One of her massive cranes was already completely underwater.

"Damn, with *Mad Dog* damaged we can't lose *Thunder Horse*," said the engineer.

Mad Dog was dubbed one of the 50 projects to change the world by Goldman Sachs, sporting the world's largest single piece truss spar, one of the biggest lifts ever set in the Gulf of Mexico. The big dog was permanently moored to the seabed, with a capacity to produce up to 100,000 barrels of oil and 60 million cubic feet of natural gas per day, much smaller than *Thunder Horse*, but significant. She was also damaged, but remained intact.

"Shall I spread the word?" The pilot gave the engineer a sheepish look.

"Better tell the techs on *Mad Dog* to get over here first," said the engineer.

“Lord,” the engineer was scratching his head, eyes wide as he surveyed the platform below them now. “We’ve got a fire down there too! With *Caesar* and *Cleopatra* off line, and big rigs like this in the water, we’re buggered for weeks, mate. Better blow the horn. This baby needs help fast. Damn thing’s about to go down under!”

“Right-o,” said the pilot, flipping his headset on to begin transmitting. “*Mad Dog, Mad Dog,* this is BP Survey, Over. “

A scratch voice answered in a few seconds. *“Go ahead, Survey.”*

“*Thunder Horse* down, mates. Repeat. *Thunder Horse* down. Survey engineer says we’ll need all your people out this way on the double, with anything you can float, over.”

Someone swore on the other end of the transmission. Then the voice came back, *“Roger that, Survey. Thunder Horse down.”*

The fall of *Thunder Horse* was to be the final blow that would virtually end drilling operations in the Gulf of Mexico. It made the earlier *Deepwater Horizon* spill seem a minor precursor by comparison, though the Gulf had yet to recover from that event. Coastal areas of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida, and adjacent marshlands were still contaminated with oil, as much of it was simply covered up by BP crews working late night shifts with bulldozers after the disastrous spill of 2010.

The vast deepwater plumes of oil had eventually settled to the floor of the sea, or dispersed in an emulsified soup throughout the Gulf. The massive methane gas release that was at least 40% of the total toxins emitted had created broiling tides and huge dead zones devoid of oxygen where nothing could live. The humid rain would be tainted for months after the event.

The public was not told the full extent of the damage. Mainstream news outlets focused on a single leaking well close to the original site of the platform, but *Thunder Horse* had long tentacles servicing widely dispersed well sites over a reservoir of one and a half billion barrels of oil. Seven wells were ripped from the sea floor when the big platform fell. They were going to gush into the ocean, virtually unimpeded, for the next year and a half, after which the pressure would equalize and the flow rate subside.

The damage from the seven ruptured wells, the “seven sisters of doom,” as they came to be called, was dire enough. The question of saving the Gulf of Mexico was on everyone’s lips in the beginning, but the effects of the

disaster on domestic pricing and supply for oil and gas were equally severe. The US had been trying to ‘frack’ its way to energy independence for years, effectively squeezing oil out of rock. Now that limited and very expensive production method could in no way compensate for the massive shortfall, and the President quickly announced the release of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to mitigate shortages.

What he didn’t announce, however, was the inevitable fact that this problem was going to be far more serious than anyone first believed, and the shortages far more pronounced. Nor did he mention the fact that the 700 million barrels of oil in the reserve would only last 35 days if it had to sustain the average US daily usage of 20 million barrels. If doled out at a more conservative rate of 5 million barrels per day it could ease the shortfall, but producers were immediately looking for any offshore oil they could get to move into the system. Oil on the sea, or ready at coastal terminals was premium now, and any carrier positioned to deliver these commodities to US terminals.

But the US, and the world, did not have 35 days to worry about the problem as the oil dwindled away. They had nine days. Events would soon push even this disaster off the headlines as political posturing and squabbling quickly became all out military confrontation. It would start slowly, building like a bad storm, and Nature would groan in protest, shaking the world with her wrath and displeasure. Nine days…Unless a new version of the events now unfolding could be forged in the past.

On Tuesday, September 21, 2021, Anton Fedorov and two Marines stood in the reactor monitoring room of the Primorskiy Engineering center near Vladivostok. They were the first to go, boldly returning to the last great war in the hopes of preventing the *final* great war. They soon vanished into the ether to take up the thread of that hunt in a distant past. That same night the Red Banner Pacific Fleet sailed from the Golden Horn Bay under the steady watch of Captain Vladimir Karpov while Admiral Volsky gathered a handful of Marines in his office at Naval Headquarters Fokino. Miles away, a large Antonov-124 cargo plane was finishing up loading operations and preparing for takeoff: eighteen Marines boarded with a team of six nuclear power plant engineers and specialists led by Chief Dobrynin, and one radiation safe container with a very special cargo.

The news crawl on *Thunder Horse* would dominate the headlines on Wednesday, but come Thursday the worsening situation in the Pacific began

to grab news cycles at the top of the hour.

On that morning Karpov was bandying words with his counterpart on an American carrier battlegroup off the coast of Japan, thinking to reach a mutual understanding that would prevent or limit hostilities. The breaking headlines in the news crawl now warned of the imminent potential outbreak of war over Taiwan, and the darkening threats from North Korea. Marshal Kim Jong Un, the so called “Brilliant Commander of Mt. Paektu” declared in a solemn statement to the United Nations: “This sacred war of justice will be a nation-wide, all-people resistance in which the traitors to the nation including heinous confrontation maniacs, warmongers and human scum will be mercilessly swept away.” As it had in the early decades of the previous century, the world was about to lose its grip on sanity in short order.

Dobrynin’s AN-124 Condor circled to land north of Makhachkala on the eastern Caspian coast, and he gazed out the pilot’s window to see the vast expanse of the sea dotted with tiny islands of framed metal on their stubby legs painted international orange—the oil platforms of superfield Kashagan. It was there that a host of producers greedily sunk their umbilicals into the silted bed of the sea to drink from the deep, rich deposits of light sweet crude. On one such platform, appropriately named “Medusa” a man named Ben Flak was having fits with the bad news coming in from the Gulf of Mexico. It was going to be a very busy day for Chevron, Royal Dutch Shell, and British Petroleum. They were all searching to find carriers for any oil they had bunkered in terminals that could be quickly moved to ports in Europe and the US before the situation got any worse.

One such carrier was a small British company, Fairchild Inc., running a fleet of seven tankers and cargo ships with a total lift capacity of 5.5 million barrels, and half of that available for a lucrative haul. The problem the company would face was the cold logic of geopolitics: where oil was found, the fires of war would soon follow.

Miles to the south, in the quiet port of Larnaca, Cyprus, the pipelines of the Caspian Sea were about to become entangled with the lives of a very special person, and a very tough sea captain on a very dangerous ship. It was a circumstance that would bring the Fairchild company into the midst of the gathering storm of war, and link its fate to that of many others who were now hot in the chase to find one man—Gennadi Orlov. But the swirling vortex opening like a black hole in history would expand, pulling people and things into the distant past and a rendezvous with fate itself on the shores of the

Caspian Sea.

Day 1

"I think and deem it for thy best that thou follow me, and I will be thy guide, and will lead thee hence through the eternal place whew thou shalt hear the despairing shrieks, shalt see the ancient spirits woeful who each proclaim the second death. And then thou shalt see those who are contented in the fire…"

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto I

Part I

The Train

"*Here we are, trapped in the amber of the moment.*
There is no why."

— Kurt Vonnegut

Chapter 1

Had he known what was waiting for them on the journey ahead Fedorov, might have never pushed forward his crazy idea. It was going to be risky, of course. It was going to be a long and dangerous journey, all the way from Vladivostok to the distant shores of the Caspian Sea, with each mile on the cold steel Siberian rails bringing them closer to the thunder and fire of the most savage war ever fought. There was no guarantee that he would ever get there safely; let alone the challenge of finding Orlov, and making it back home. His plan might not work at all! They might never be found by the rescue team. They might find themselves marooned in the past, even as Orlov was when he took that fateful, wild jump from the helicopter.

But they had to try.

The cold fog of Vladivostok harbor was as real as any other, he thought, and it was his only reality now. They were here. They made it through to 1942. They had delivered their letter to the storage bin at the naval supply building and the cold clink of the lock jarred him with the realization of what he had done. It was as if his old life, all of it, was locked away behind that storage bin door and forever lost to him now. The lock would not be opened again for nearly eighty long years. His grandfather had been the last man to close that bin door, perhaps just a few years ago, he thought. Now here he was, sliding that letter into the pocket of his grandfather's coat, the ghost of a man that had not even been born yet in this year—1942. There it would sit untouched by human hands, unread by human eyes for another eight decades, or so he hoped. Yet the thought that it would be Admiral Volsky reading it one day gave him heart, and hope.

There was no time to lose now, and long dangerous miles lay ahead of them. They moved like ghosts in the mist, wasting no time getting to the rail depot where they found one last train was going to be heading north within the hour and routed all the way to Omsk. That would get them very close to their objective, in Russian terms. No place was really very close to another here, and the lonesome iron rails were often the only means of expeditious travel from one place to another. He made arrangements to get his team aboard this train immediately, and with his black Ushanka hat and NKVD badge he knew they would have no immediate trouble getting aboard. He

simply told the Rail Master that he would be inspecting facilities along the entire line, and had vital papers to be delivered in Omsk. No one objected. NKVD officers are not to be trifled with, and a Colonel was a very high rank in that shadowed organization. The Rail Master gave him quick directions, and the engine number of the train. It was a freight haul, but there were two coaches attached at the back of the train just forward of the caboose.

Minutes later, they settled into the rear coach, taking the seats in one of two enclosed *kupe* compartments at the very back near the small rest room. The *provodnits,* or coach supervisor dressed in plain military garb eyed them briefly, noting Fedorov's obvious NKVD uniform and rank, and casting a furtive glance at Troyak and Zykov. He said nothing, as if he expected they would take the compartment, and quickly withdrew to the forward coach, wanting nothing to do with these dangerous looking men.

Fedorov gave the passengers in the main coach compartment a cursory glance, but Zykov had already boldly walked the aisle, looking everyone over and making it obvious that he was a security man looking for any possible threats. There were fourteen passengers in the seats, five soldiers who gave them wary looks when they boarded, then settled back into their dozing slumber when they saw that Fedorov in his dark NKVD uniform and cap did not seem to be there in any official capacity. The others were civilians, a line crew of six rail workers in stained grey overalls, and an older couple with a small child. The little girl stared up at the imposing figure of Zykov as he passed her seat, her eyes wide until Zykov winked at her, smiling, which only sent her deeper into the folds of the babushka she was with. Satisfied the coach was secure, Zykov joined Troyak and Fedorov in the *kupe*, though they left the door open to be wary of anyone who might be moving in the aisle.

The fog was still heavy when the screech of rusty wheels announced their departure and the cars jolted slightly as the brakes were released. The train rolled slowly on through the pre-dawn hour, winding its way north and slightly west to the Amur River. Soon they came to Ussuriysk where the line split off in several branches. They kept to the main spur heading up to Khabarovsk on the longest rail line in the world. It would be twelve hours before they reached that place, some 450 miles to the north, and they took advantage of the dark and quiet to get some food and much needed rest.

As dawn came on what Fedorov figured to be September 23, 1942, he was awake to watch the wan light gleaming off the sallow winding course of the river. Now and again the train would stop at small villages and towns,

though there would not be much more civilian traffic on this freight haul. Soon they began to bypass the smaller hamlets, stopping only on the larger settlements where the line crews would exit the coach and mill about the line briefly, checking the ten cargo carriers up to the engine, or looking over rail switch stations before re-boarding. They would ride all day to Khabarovsk, and the sun was already low in the sky by the time they reached the place. The rail workers job there was to replenish the water in the locomotive and restock at the coaling station.

Curious and needing to stretch his legs, Fedorov wandered out to watch them work under the watchful eye of Troyak, who was leaning on the train coach, chewing on something he had fished out of his pack. The rail workers were haggling over the coal with a fat, red nosed man who was holding up his hands in some frustration. Fedorov approached them to see what was going on, noting how the discussion immediately quieted down when they saw him coming.

“What is the problem here?”

“He says the coal is bad,” one man explained. “A workman left the bin doors open and it was drenched by the rain.”

“You mean to say there is no good coal in all of Khabarovsk?”

“Take all you wish,” the fat man offered, much more agreeable now that he spied the NKVD insignia on Fedorov’s cap. “But I am sorry to say it may not burn well for several days.”

Expect the unexpected, thought Fedorov. They could not afford any delay here. He looked about the marshalling yard, seeing several oil stained barrels off by a warehouse. “Are those full?”

The fat man leaned out, squinting at the barrels, nodding in the affirmative. “Yes, oil and lubricants.”

“Take one,” Fedorov said to the rail workers. “Load it at the coaling compartment and oil the coal in a bucket before you put it in the fire box. That should do.”

The workers, hesitated, thinking they might instead enjoy a long break here and mill about the town while they waited for the coal to dry. “We could wait a day, sir,” one man suggested. “It should dry out by tomorrow.”

“We will not wait a single moment!” Fedorov tried to be firm, though he did not present a very intimidating presence. Yet his uniform, insignia and the prominent decorations on his breast cast a long shadow and made him seem much more imposing than he really was. “This train has a schedule to

keep," he said again, tapping his wrist watch. "We must be in Omsk in four days—understand? Now get moving. You men, load that barrel."

The rail crew knew an order when they heard one. They took pride in their jobs, a special class of skilled labor servicing the steel arteries of Mother Russia. The lead man started off towards the barrels, whistling and waving for two of the others to follow him. He had not expected this NKVD man would be on the train but knew he was going to have to live with him until they reached their destination. Satisfied the men were doing as he wanted, Fedorov walked back to join Troyak.

"Any trouble?" the Sergeant asked.

"The coal will need oiling due to the rain. They were going to wait a day, but we can't spare any delay. We must get to Omsk on schedule and then we leave the main line and head south to Kazakhstan."

Fedorov had a lot of time to think things over, wondering what would lie ahead and feeling at times that his plan was completely insane. It was going to be a long journey: two more days to Irkutsk as the line swept north around the wide bend of the Amur River which marked the border with China. They would pass through Chita and Ulan Ude before turning south towards Mongolia where the route would curve beneath the cold banks of Lake Baikal to eventually find the city of Irkutsk. From there it would be another long day to Krasnoyarsk, and then a day through Novosibirsk to Omsk.

They planned to leave the line at Omsk and take a spur heading west through Chelyabinsk to Orsk on the Kazakh border, reaching that place by the 28th. From there they would cross into Kazakhstan and take a local rail line from Aktobe to Atyrau on the north Caspian Sea. At that point Fedorov planned to avoid Astrakhan and go by sea on a trawler or fishing boat, and he had gold in his pocket to secure one if necessary, or Troyak and Zykov to secure what gold would not buy. If all went well they would be on the Caspian coast near Kizlyar by the 30th, but they had no time to loiter or waste along the route.

The coaling incident was a typical example of common delays they might experience. If too many stacked up they would be unable to find Orlov at Kizlyar and would have to look for him at Baku.

Troyak watched the men rolling the barrel on its rim this way and that as they labored to get it near the locomotive. He spat with a grin and strode over to the group of three, waving them aside. Then he stooped down on his haunches, put his brawny arms around the barrel, and lifted it without even so

much as a grunt. It was only three quarters full yet must have weighed over 200 pounds. Built like a locomotive himself, Troyak carried it easily to the back of the engine followed by a gaggle of rail workers. He heaved it up on the muddy metal plated flooring of the coaling compartment, and turned, brushing off his rough hands and seeing the astonished looks on the faces of the rail crew.

“Load your coal,” he said curtly, and walked off to rejoin Fedorov. The train was rolling out of the station half an hour later.

On the morning of the 25th of September they caught sight of the crystalline waters of Lake Baikal, one of the most ancient and enduring lakes on earth, over 20 million years old. Holding almost twenty percent of all the fresh water on the planet, the lake stretched in a great cobalt crescent extending some 670 kilometers to the north. The railway had to climb steep ridges on its southern nose, switching back and forth and presenting spectacular views of the lake in all its raw, yet serene beauty. The water was so clear and clean that you could see forty meters into its pristine depths. Even when it froze to a thickness of up to ten meters in winter, the ice still had a glass-like quality of transparency.

Local lore said the Siberian shamans of old attributed special healing powers to the waters here, but Troyak found a taste of the savory ‘Omul’ fish sold by an old woman at the Mysovaya train station to be more than enough to fortify him. They found it freshly caught, and set up a makeshift brazier to grill it to a smoky delight that was much akin to salmon.

The three men were resting quietly on a bench near the watering station while the rail attendants topped off their tank when they heard the labored approach of another train coming in from the west. It was a short train with a weathered old red engine followed by three gray freight cars, a coach car, and two large boxcars painted dull green. As the train rolled to a stop they saw five armed guards jump down from the coach car in brown NKVD uniforms and carrying rifles with bayonets. Fedorov watched as one guard went to the first boxcar and raised the iron door latch while the other four slowly pulled the doors open.

They heard the sound of people moaning and groaning from the shadowy interior, and they could smell the stench of excrement, urine and dank body odor even where they sat about twenty yards away from the other train. Fedorov immediately realized that this was a group of detainees, most likely bound for one of the hundreds of labor camps haunting the forbidding

reaches of Siberia in the great ‘Gulag Archipelago.’

These lost souls had probably been rounded up in a wild and unexpected moment when the soldiers would come to their homes, pounding loudly on the door with shouts of *“Otkroite!* Open up!” whatever grievance they had, or whether or not there was any proof of wrongdoing on the victims’ part, did not matter. It was often merely the simple fact of the neighborhood they lived in that condemned them and saw them rousted out of their homes in the night and herded aboard these obscene train cars heading east into the oblivion of Siberia. Once they had reached their destination, those that survived the oppressive journey would be interrogated by the Bluecaps, NKVD security men, and their “case” would be manufactured on the spot in that dark hour, a confession extracted, and a judgment rendered that would shadow their lives for years—or end their lives.

This group looked like they had been on the train for a good long time, haggard and disheveled, their faces gaunt and fearful under hollow eyes that seemed to stare ahead blankly, as though they were unwilling to truly see or believe what was happening to them. Fedorov looked at Troyak, shaking his head.

“Welcome to Stalin’s world,” he said quietly. “We have had an easy ride west thus far, but we forget what happened in this war, the misery we inflicted on our own people, and the terror and injustice of it all.”

Troyak nodded, eying the soldiers with unfriendly eyes. They soon realized that aside from ventilating the cramped boxcar, the guards were also looking to remove anyone who had died the previous night. Their harsh voices lashed at the people huddled in the car and Fedorov saw that they were pointing at a man who lay on the soiled hay of the boxcar floor. They wanted him shoved out, but he could hear the sound of a boy crying, women sobbing, and then he saw that a young lad was holding dearly to the old man’s hand, crying fitfully. The boy would not let go, which soon prompted one of the guards to reach in and give him a hard slap on the back of his head, and then another when this only increased his terrified weeping.

Fedorov had seen enough, standing up with an angry expression on his face. “Here we are trying to stop world war three, but we can damn well do something about this one as well.” He strode boldly towards the scene, walking briskly across the intervening rail lines with a determined gait. Troyak and Zykov were up at once, waiting to see what would happen and watching the armed soldiers closely.

“You men!” Fedorov shouted. “What are you doing?” He saw that the soldier who had struck the boy was just about to turn his bayonet on the lad and he immediately seized him by the arm and dragged him back. The guard spun around, the butt of his rifle ready to strike. Then he saw the dark Ushanka on Fedorov’s head, the shoulder straps on his jacket and insignia on his chest, and he stopped himself.

“I’m sorry, sir. I did not see you. I thought you were one of these.” He wagged his head derisively toward the open boxcar. Fedorov looked inside, horrified to see the condition of the car. People were huddled together so closely that they could barely move. The putrid smell of death rolled from the open door. He saw where they had managed to pry loose one of the floorboards in the center of the car where it now served as the solitary toilet facility. The thought that people—men, women, children, would have to squat there on the long train ride filled him with revulsion. Two or three women were sobbing quietly, and the young boy still clung woefully to the old man’s arm, wailing “*dedushka*, *dedushka*—grandfather, grandfather!”

“The man is dead,” the guard pointed. “He must be removed.”

Fedorov edged closer to the boy, seeing how the people nearest to him instinctively shirked back—from the uniform he wore, not knowing the man inside this one, but having undoubtedly met many others who wore that garb.

“Do not be afraid,” he said in a quiet voice, and he reached in and put his hand softly on the young boy’s head, as if to soothe away the sting of the guard’s blows and comfort him. A young woman brave enough to meet his eyes was watching the scene, and seeing her he gestured that she should come closer. “Help me with him, please,” he said quietly.

He told the boy not to worry, and that they were going to take his grandpa to see the doctor. Hearing his voice and seeing the expression on his face, the people seemed to perceive that he was of a different ilk, uniform aside, and two men within moved to assist. One of the women took the young boy into her arms while the men eased the old man out. The guards just stood there stupidly, thinking to see the man simply pushed from the train car onto the ground, and when Fedorov saw this he sharply ordered them to take hold of the man and carry him forward, out of the boy’s sight.

Fedorov turned to the soldier who had struck the child, his anger still very apparent. “What is your name, soldier?”

“Melinikov, sir.”

“You have a grandfather, Melinikov?”

“Sir?

“You have a grandfather, do you not? What if he was lying there on that filthy floor, eh? And what were you going to do with that bayonet, kill a child?”

“His grandfather would not be stupid enough to get himself stuffed in a rail car like that,” came a hard edged voice, and Fedorov turned to see another NKVD man had come out of the coach car and was striding to the scene. He looked to be an officer, and he did not look happy. “Who are you and what business is it of yours?”

Chapter 2

Fedorov knew from the sound of his voice that this man was the ring leader of this rail security detachment, a Lieutenant by rank, inured to the pain and suffering of others and the man truly responsible for the conditions here. He knew this train was probably one of a hundred others that had come east this month, and though it seemed a futile blow against a tide he could not possibly hope to stem, he was here in front of this train at the moment and, by God, he was going to do something about situation.

“What business is it of mine?” he said with as much of a tone of threat as he could put in his voice. He turned to face the man, allowing deliberate silence to communicate his displeasure as he looked him up and down. The officer wore black leather boots beneath flared navy blue trousers and a leather jacket with gold plated buttons. A brown shoulder strap crossed his chest to a pistol holster at his left hip. A brown leather pouch was at his other hip, attached to his belt. A young man, he nonetheless wore round wire framed spectacles and seemed to squint in spite of them, his eyes narrow with insolence. He wore a black billed, blue felt officer’s cap with a gold star centered on red hatband. His face was shrouded with a pall of cigarette smoke and he took a long draw on the butt before slowly pinching the tip to put it out, exhaling heavily.

“These are my men,” he said slowly. “This is my train, and we have a schedule to keep. Who are you?”

Fedorov ignored his challenge. “Oh, you have a schedule to keep? Is that so? Well when are you supposed to continue east, Lieutenant?” He named the man’s rank with some disdain in his voice, squaring off to him so his rank and insignia were apparent, particularly the medals on his chest: the Order of the Red Star over his right breast, correctly placed after the Order of the Patriotic War, 1st class.

“As soon as we feed these mongrels, what concern is it of yours?”

“I have just made it my concern, and now you will make it yours. The conditions on this train are despicable. I want these people taken off the cars, and you and your men will clean them, lay in fresh straw, and then you will feed these people, understood?”

“My men? Clean their filth?” The Lieutenant smirked at him. “You must

be joking."

"And you must be deaf," Fedorov said quickly. "And possibly blind as well." Then he did something that he had seen in a movie once, though he could not recall the picture. He had been standing, hands on his hips as he confronted the NKVD Lieutenant, and now he just extended his right hand off to one side and loudly snapped his fingers, as if summoning some vicious dog. "Sergeant Troyak!"

The heavy footfalls of the solid Siberian Gunnery Sergeant were quick and hard on the graveled rail beds as Troyak strode up to the scene. "Sir!" he said crisply, more dangerous looking than any dog Fedorov could have called to his side.

"Sergeant, the Lieutenant here must be deaf. He doesn't seem to know an order when he hears one. What do you think of that?"

"Regrettable, sir." Troyak fixed the Lieutenant with a hard stare.

"And the Lieutenant here must be blind as well, because he doesn't seem to know there's an NKVD *Colonel* standing in front of him."

"Very blind, sir." Troyak took a step forward, very deliberately.

"Indeed. Well what should we do about this, Sergeant?"

"Sir, perhaps the Lieutenant needs a new pair of spectacles." Troyak turned, silently pulling off his leather gloves as he stared the officer down with a murderous glare. He saw the other man's hand drift slowly towards the holster on his left hip, and spoke again, his tone so menacing and hostile that it seemed to freeze the other man's blood. "And if the Lieutenant is *stupid* enough to try and draw his pistol perhaps he needs his head ripped off and shoved up his ass as well."

Now Troyak clenched his jaw and took two small steps forward his eyes never loosening their grip on the other man, his physical mass and presence awesomely threatening. The Lieutenant instinctively took a backward step, seeming to quail before the rock-like figure before him. Few men on earth would have been able to stand their ground against the look Troyak had on his face.

Fedorov had to struggle to keep a serious expression on his own face. He repeated his order. "You and your men will hand your weapons to the Sergeant here and find shovels, Lieutenant. Then you will clean both these train cars at once. Lay in fresh straw, get these people fed, and place a barrel of fresh water with cups and a bucket in each car. And be damn quick about it! This train has a schedule to keep, if I recall what you told me just a

moment ago."

The NKVD Lieutenant was livid, but clearly intimidated, his eyes bobbing from Fedorov to Troyak and back again, his hand still on his holster buckle. He stole a glance at his men. Three were still standing by the open boxcar door, bayoneted rifles in hand, their eyes fixed on their Lieutenant as they wondered what they should do. One man was slowly leveling his rifle at Fedorov until another voice was heard. Zykov had been watching closely and keeping a particularly sharp eye on the armed soldiers. Now he was strolling quietly up to the scene, Russian Spetsnaz SMG primed and ready.

"Finally some work for my Bizon-2," he said naming the weapon as he brandished it at the soldiers. "Nine by eighteen millimeter high impulse Makarov rounds in a helical sixty-four round magazine. Very good in a firefight, particularly at close quarters. Fully automatic at seven hundred rounds per minute when I have to clear a room out." He stood, looking at the soldiers with a grim smile on his face.

Finally the Lieutenant spit out an order. "Put those rifles down and do as the Colonel says," he said with obvious agitation, his face reddening with anger and humiliation. Then to Fedorov he said, "This is unheard of! The Chief of Security will want to know about this, I assure you!"

"Is that so? Where is he?" Fedorov looked around. "Is he here? Another man would make the work go faster, yes?"

The Lieutenant threw his cigarette butt to the ground and started to turn and walk away, looking back with annoyance when Troyak put his big hand on his shoulder, held him in place, and then deftly removed his pistol from the side holster. "He *must* be deaf, sir. He was about to walk away without giving me his weapon as ordered."

"Regrettable," said Fedorov.

Zykov was standing a few feet away now, trying to keep himself from laughing, but still watching the soldiers very closely. Then, at a hand gesture from Troyak, he moved quickly to collect the rifles. There were shovels at the back of the coach car and Fedorov told Troyak to supervise the work and make sure it was done correctly.

"But what about this lot?" The NKVD Lieutenant pointed at the occupants of the train.

"Don't worry about them. I'll keep an eye on them while you work. Now get busy, Lieutenant. I have a schedule to keep as well—three more trains to inspect today, and yours has just interrupted my meal."

The Lieutenant and his guards emptied out the first car, and Fedorov saw to it that the soldiers helped the youngest children and infirm. He also told Zykov to get the five soldiers still riding in his own train coach and put them to work on the other car. After seeing what had just happened, and realizing they would be riding on the same train car with this unexpected NKVD Colonel, they made no protest and quickly went to work. When the bespectacled Lieutenant saw this squad he naturally assumed they were the rank and file of Fedorov's security detachment, and he inwardly cursed his bad luck in running across this Colonel. He had not expected to find another NKVD unit here.

Fedorov watched until he was satisfied the work was being done as ordered. Then he sent the railroad workers off into the marshalling yard and told them to bring any fresh hay they could find at hand, which was often kept in yard bins for just this purpose. It took all of two hours, but when the work had finally finished Fedorov made a point of finding the Lieutenant again.

"What is your name," he demanded.

"Lieutenant Mikael Surinov." The man was clearly not happy, but of no mind to confront this Colonel who had come upon the scene so unexpectedly. Yet he burned with inner anger and resentment over what he had been forced to do.

"Well, Lieutenant, you are a disgrace to that uniform. Yes, our job is security here, and yes, it's a dirty business, but not like this—not with our own people. Let the Nazis do that."

"But these are detainees of the state!" Surinov protested.

"That may be so, but they are human beings. Who knows what they did to end up stuffed in that filthy train car? Probably nothing. They are most likely there because some ass like you simply decided they should be. Your man almost put a bayonet through a ten year old crying for his Dedushka! Now where is this train going?"

"Khabarovsk. The Camp at Verkhniy."

"Khabarovsk? Excellent!" Fedorov smiled, with some good *lozh* in mind. "I just came from there to make these inspections. I'll be heading back that way soon. See that this train is kept clean and humane for the rest of the trip east. Understand?"

He made one last inspection of the cars, still not satisfied. There were too many people crammed into too little space. So he took Surinov in tow and

inspected the rest of the train. There were two coach cars, largely empty just like his own train.

"Who is riding in this coach?"

"My men, of course," said Surinov.

"Five men in using all this space? There must be seats for thirty people here. And who is in the other coach?"

"That is my car." Surinov raised his chin, looking at Fedorov through the bottom of his spectacles.

"Your car?" Fedorov's disapproval was apparent.

He walked boldly up to the car and had a look inside. There were three young women there, obviously very frightened, and one had a thick lip where she had taken a blow recently. He pursed his lips, realizing what was going on here at once, and very upset.

"So you prefer the company of women, do you? Well it's time you learned some military discipline, Lieutenant. You are an officer in the State Internal Security Division, and this train is being sent east for a purpose—it is not a brothel! You want to share your coach with women? So be it!"

He strode off and soon had his soldiers remove all the elderly women from the over cramped box cars, the old babushkas who might be the next to die on the long journey in the cold box cars. If there were married couples he let their husbands accompany them, and he soon had Troyak and Zykov supervise their placement in more comfortable seats and compartments in the two coach cars. Then he went back to the Lieutenant, removed the three young girls from his car and sent them back to the box cars, a much safer place for them now, or so he reasoned.

Lieutenant Surinov watched, a controlled rage plain to see on his face, though he could do nothing about the situation. Who was this new NKVD man? He had never seen him on the line before this, nor had he ever seen an NKVD colonel act this way.

When the resettlement was finished Fedorov went back to Surinov with one last threatening order. "I see there is no room left in your coach now. All the seats are taken, so you and your men will now ride in the engine or coal car. Understood? Don't worry about these people, the *provodnits* will manage them. They are to remain here until you reach your final destination, and they are to be treated with dignity and respect!" His voice was loud now, and everyone in the two coach cars could hear what he was saying.

"Now…I will have my men return your weapons—but *without* the

bayonets. These are people, not cattle to be poked and prodded by cold steel. Their fate in Khabarovsk is in the hands of the Camp Commandant, but their fate on this ride east is in *your* hands. I just counted a hundred and eighty-three souls here, and you are now responsible for their safe delivery. God help *your* soul should another one die before you get to Khabarovsk….And leave the young girls alone! Those are someone's daughters, yes? What kind of man are you?"

Surinov was clearly unhappy with this but stood stolidly, his eyes narrowed, face red with outrage and humiliation. Fedorov could see that the man's temper would not change easily, and feared that as soon as the train reached the next stop all his work here would be undone, and with considerable anger by this man. He decided he had better make his orders more pointed.

"I am not making suggestions here, Lieutenant. These are your orders now, and you had better be listening. When I return I will make inquiries about this train. I will come looking for you again, Lieutenant Mikael Surinov. I have written down your name. If I discover you have fallen back on your old ways and these people have been mistreated again, then I believe you and I will sit down with the Sergeant for a very long and uncomfortable discussion. If I hear that these orders were disobeyed…then I hope you enjoy this train ride, it will be your last, Lieutenant."

He poked the Lieutenant firmly on the chest where he thought the man's soul might reside if he had one, then turned and strode away, a small feeling of satisfaction growing in him as he returned to his freight train, now ready to leave the station.

As they moved west out of the yard Fedorov looked back one last time and saw the other train slowing moving east. He knew he could not right every wrong he would encounter on this journey, and that the days ahead for those poor people would still be harsh and cruel, but not on his watch, and not today. His intervention was one small drop of righteous compassion in a sea of sorrow and war, but for that day it was enough, and it was all that mattered.

He settled into the *kupe* compartment and the uniformed *provodnits,* made his coach check. The man had seen and heard the entire incident from a window in the forward coach, and when his eye met Fedorov's there was a glint of a smile there, and a glimmer of respect where there had once been wary fear.

It will get worse, thought Fedorov. The train would slowly approach the war zone, and he expected to see much more military activity on the line, and much more human sorrow. Getting south to Kizlyar would not be easy once they left the main rail at Omsk. That is when he expected the most danger. It was not merely a question of miles now, but decades as well. To succeed he had to complete this perilous journey, find Orlov and get him safely to the Caspian coast, hoping that the rescue operation would appear to bring them all home. That failing… he could not go further into that darkness in his mind. They had to find them, Volsky's team *had* to come. The world was depending on it.

Chapter 3

He woke from a troubled sleep with that same thought in mind—the world was depending on him—but the sound he heard outside made his blood run cold. He sat up in the darkness, blinking, his awareness keenly focused on the sound, like distant artillery fire, a low threatening rumble of thunder, yet impossibly far away, a strange echo of something vast and terrible—but what was it? For a brief moment he struggled to remember where he was… the long rail journey through the wilderness of Siberia…Ilanskiy... the hotel….

After they left Irkutsk they had continued northwest towards Krasnoyarsk, another long day that covered nearly 600 kilometers. Near dusk they were several hours east of the city but the train needed to make a scheduled stop at a small town called Ilanskiy. The rail line moved through some heavily wooded terrain, then bent south of a river to enter the town, where they found several other trains parked in parallel lines on the marshalling yards. Three of their cargo cars would be off-loaded here before the train would continue west through Krasnoyarsk, Novorossiysk and eventually reach Omsk.

Fedorov had learned about the hotel from the railway workers. They called it the ‘Locomativnyh’ or ‘rail workers holiday house’ established at an old inn a few blocks from the marshalling yards. It was going to be six hours before the freight operation concluded, so Fedorov determined to rest there and see if they could get some decent food and a few hours sleep before the train was scheduled to depart just after midnight.

They entered the reception area of the old hotel and Fedorov saw the portrait of an elderly man behind the front desk, with a well oiled mustache and white hair, obviously the ancestor and founder of the establishment before the revolution. He spoke briefly with the receptionist, who also doubled as the serving lady in the dining room, a young woman named Ilanya after the town itself. She wore a plain white apron and red head scarf, and seemed very intimidated when Fedorov appeared with Troyak and Zykov. Seeing the apprehension in her eyes, Fedorov engaged her in a friendly voice

to ally her fears.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We have no business here. We are just traveling west, and the rail workers on our train spoke highly of your hotel. Your father?” He smiled, pointing to the portrait on the wall behind the front desk.

“My grandfather,” she said quietly. “He built the hotel here before the turn of the century, and when the Commissariat established authority in the province it was converted to a rest and boarding facility for the railroad workers. Better that than an army barracks,” she said. “I have a room with three beds on the second floor, and *Uzhin* is served in half an hour—good hot stew tonight, with fresh bread.”

“It sounds wonderful,” said Fedorov. They took a table in the dining hall, the aroma from the kitchen already heavy in the room and their hunger well stoked. They had been living off bread, cheese, and some dry salami Troyak found along the way, but they were soon treated to a nice thick stew with potatoes, carrots, celery, onions and even a bit of boiled beef. The gravy was particularly good and the fresh, hot tea was just what they needed.

“Another three or four hours to Krasnoyarsk,” said Fedorov. “But we’ll be there before dawn. I suggest we get some sleep before we leave at midnight.”

“A real bed sounds good,” said Troyak.

Fedorov thought for a moment. “Sergeant, what do you think our chances are?” He left that out there without much explanation, but Troyak could see that he was worried, and knew he was talking about finding Orlov.

“We’ll find him,” said Troyak matter of factly.

“I wish I could feel so assured,” said Fedorov. Russia is a big place, though at least we know where to start in this search.”

“If he’s still wearing his service jacket we can home in on his signal. I can activate the jacket if we get within a five kilometer radius of its position.”

“We can? I did not know this!” Fedorov’s mood lightened considerably.

“The same goes for you,” said Troyak. “So always keep your service jacket on. It’s our means of close communication, and we can track down Orlov from the IFF transceiver in the lining. All the Marines have this.”

“Then if the rescue team arrives they will be able to find us this way too?”

“Correct.” Troyak finished his tea, arms folded on his broad chest. “If I broadcast it extends the homing range to fifty kilometers.”

Fedorov nodded, considerably relieved. Troyak had told him something about this earlier, but with all the stress of his planning he had let it slip his

mind. Suddenly their prospects seemed much brighter.

“I’ll have a look around outside,” said Zykov, “and a smoke if I can bum a cigarette off the Sergeant.”

“How come you forget to pack your own, Zykov?” Troyak forced a smile, and reached into his shirt pocket.

“All my pockets are full of ammunition, Sergeant.” Zykov patted his thick shirt pocket where Fedorov saw a clip for his pistol. Somebody has to be responsible for security, eh?”

Zykov left to make his rounds and Troyak took the main stairway up to their room while Fedorov lingered a moment at the table with his tea. When he saw the serving lady enter with an armful of firewood, he immediately got up to assist her with the burden.

“Oh, it is no problem, thank you,” said Ilyana. “Winter is coming, and we have fresh cut firewood this season. Lucky for that. Last year we had to barter for coal from the train station, but wood is so much nicer. The workers were cutting trees for railway ties, and they left us some.”

“I understand,” said Fedorov with the odd thought that he was now speaking to a dead woman, or at the very least a very old babushka if she could live to reach his day in 2021, which he doubted. “Well, Ilanya, the stew was very good, and I think a few hours sleep on a decent bed will be even better. May I take that stairway to find my room?” He gestured to a darkened, narrow stair leading up just around the corner from the hearth.

“Oh… not that one. Take the main stairs. It’s silly but they say bad things about the back stairway—old stories. My grandfather refused to ever use them, and I was never allowed to play anywhere near them as a child. So old habits die hard, I suppose. I always take the main stairs.”

“Very well, Madame, good evening.”

She gave him an odd look when he addressed her so respectfully, but the expression on her face was one of relief and pleasure. This man was clearly unlike any other NKVD officer she had ever encountered, though the two soldiers with him seemed frightening, as all men of war were in her young eyes.

Fedorov made his way out past the front desk to the main stairs and climbed the creaking wood steps to the upper floor. The long hallway was dimly lit by guttering oil lamps and he passed the drafty, dark recess of the back stairway Ilanya had talked about, unlit by any lantern. He thought it would have been much faster to go by that route, but moved on with a shrug.

Two doors down he came to the main suite at the end of the long hallway, number 212. Then the hall turned at a right angle and stretched off above the dining area to another set of rooms.

Knowing Troyak as he did, he knocked, quietly whispering his name before he tried the door. He entered to find a simple room, with three beds as promised and a small writing desk and chair. There was a sink on one wall, and a window at the far end of the room overlooked a small city park with a waterless stone fountain. He looked out at the weathered branches silhouetted by a waning gibbous moon rising near full in the gray sky.

“Zykov should be back soon,” said Troyak. “He’s very thorough. He won’t be satisfied until he has peeked into every storage bin and barn within five hundred yards of this place. A good man, Zykov.”

“It’s a pity Bukin didn’t make it through,” said Fedorov. “I don’t know what went wrong, but I wanted to apologize to you, Sergeant. He was one of your men. If anything happened to him…”

“Don’t worry, sir. Bukin knew the risks involved, as we all do.”

“If it’s any consolation I’m hoping he is still safe in Vladivostok. I just don’t think the reactor there had the power to move us all, though I can’t be certain about it.”

“I understand, sir.”

Fedorov sighed. “Well then, let’s get some sleep.” He wasted no time, removing his heavy outer coat and settling on the simple bed, though he followed Troyak’s lead and left his boots on. The mattress was old and lumpy, but the blankets were clean and it was much more comfortable than their train compartment. They would just be here a few hours, but sleep was welcome and came quickly to him, and he was soon lost in the inner world of his dreams.

But this was no dream…No, not this. The sound was so riveting that he immediately sat up, eyes wide, and saw that both Troyak and Zykov were already reaching for their handguns. They had been sleeping for some time before they heard it. Now both men were looking around, even as Fedorov, trying to locate the source of the sound. Zykov went to the window, standing stiffly to one side to peer outside, but the night seemed dark and still. He leaned down and opened the window, forcing it up with a dry squeak. The sound was not coming from the park behind the hotel.

Fedorov was up and at the door, but Troyak waved him aside, tensely alert. The Sergeant took something from his side belt and held it at the door,

unmoving, a kind of infrared sensor, or so Fedorov thought. Then in one swift motion Troyak opened the door. Zykov was right behind them.

"Cover the main stairs," the Sergeant whispered to Zykov. "I'll take the upper level. You check down stairs. Fedorov, stay here, but can you watch that stairway?" Troyak pointed to the shadowy depression that led to the back stairs.

The two men moved like silent assassins, so deft and purposeful, their weapons at the ready as they began to sweep the building's upper floor. The first job was to rule out trouble in their immediate environs, he knew. Troyak slipped around the corner and was off down one hallway. Zykov drifted silently down the other hall toward the main stairs. Fedorov watched them go, then thought he had best draw his pistol, eying the dark back stairway with suspicion and some trepidation.

He crept slowly toward the stairs, suddenly surprised to see a strange amber glow there. It seemed to pulse and waver, like the flickering glow from a fire. Then he heard it again, that distant rumble, like bombs exploding or artillery firing, and the sound seemed to echo in the narrow confines of the hall. He started down the stair, lit now by the amber glow, his footfalls noisome on the old wood steps. It led down to the corner alcove near the hearth in the dining room. As he neared the lower level the amber light brightened to a warm ruddy glow. Could there be a fire?

A strange sensation overcame him, and he reached to brace himself near the bottom of the narrow stair. He thought he heard shouts, voices, but in a language he did not understand. "*Was fur ein gerausch? Was ist passiert?"*

Seconds later he reached the bottom alcove, pistol held out before him like he had seen Zykov demonstrate. He stepped off the last stair, feeling very odd, a queasy sensation that left him dizzy for a moment. There was no smoke or fire that he could see, and no heat. Yet the terrible roar was louder now, a throbbing in the air, and he heard the crying of a baby, and people yelling outside the building.

Stepping quickly from the stairwell he could to see he was back in the dining hall, but it was bathed in ruddy light from outside the building. The drab tables were now covered with white linen, and dressed out with candle fixtures and styled table settings. Several windows were shattered, leaving shards of glass scattered over the floor. He saw food on one table, a chair overturned, a glass half filled with dark tea still quivering with a strange vibration in the air, as if the meal had been suddenly abandoned. Then the

full realization of what he was seeing struck him. The glow he had seen was daylight! The rich red light of sunrise was streaming through the shattered windows on the eastern wall of the building, yet it seemed too bright, too searing. They must have fallen into a deep asleep, he thought, but the implications of this soon followed—they had missed their train!

He turned, thinking to go to the front desk and meet Zykov coming down the main stairs. When he walked into the reception area he found it empty and the front door was ajar, lit by that amber glow. Something was happening—outside—he could hear frightened voices on the street, and the sound of people running. There came a deep booming sound again, and he felt the windows shake with a tremulous rattle.

Troyak reached the end of the hall, his eyes tight, jaw set. He had checked every room, but no one else was billeted here for the night. The rail workers had eaten their meal and returned to the train to help with the freight operation. He squeezed the button on his collar and spoke quietly into the hidden microphone there.

"Zykov? Troyak here. All clear on the upper level."

Zykov's voice spoke in a quick return in his earbud: *"Main stairway and front desk clear. Checking the entrance and outside grounds now."*

Then he heard it again, the deep rumble, like distant thunder, or far off explosions, yet it was not coming from outside, but *behind* him, echoing down the long hallway. He turned, his attention immediately drawn to the source of the sound, and spoke into his collar microphone again. "Fedorov—are the back stairs clear?"

There was no answer.

Troyak was off at once, his arms stiffly leading his line of movement, pistol held securely in both hands. He reached the open door to their room and slipped inside. "Fedorov?"

There was no answer.

A cursory search satisfied him that the room was empty, and he holstered his pistol, snatching up his automatic SMG and flipping off the safety. Then he moved like a shadow, out the door and quickly to the back stairs. All was quiet and dark there, and he flicked a switch on his weapon to activate a search light. The narrow stairs extended down, their small wooden steps covered with dust, but he plainly saw the imprint of a man's footsteps, heading down. Fedorov, must have gone that way, he reasoned, and he started down after him.

The Sergeant reached the bottom landing, springing quickly out of the alcove into the dining room, weapon at the ready. The room was dark and silent, the embers of the fire the only source of light beyond the pale moonlight that gleamed on the windows and cast its wan pallor over the bleak, empty tables.

He heard a door creak open, and quickly withdrew to the alcove. The young serving woman, Ilanya had emerged from her room behind the front desk. When she saw Troyak she immediately shirked, clutching a plain grey robe to her throat.

“What is wrong?” she said fearfully.

There were heavy footfalls at the front entrance and Troyak stood waiting, his finger drifting quietly to the trigger of his weapon. Then in walked Zykov, his automatic weapon in hand, and a look on his face that was all business.

“All clear outside,” he said, looking at his watch. “No sign of trouble. The station is quiet and they are still offloading freight. It is only 10:30.”

Troyak looked at the serving woman. “Have you seen our comrade colonel?”

She shook her head in the negative.

Troyak turned so the woman would not see him and reached into his service jacket, pinching off the IFF locator squeeze switch. He listened while the voice played in his earbuds, then spoke quietly in return. “Locate signal zero alpha one.”

“Searching…” Came the voice in the earbud. *“Signal not found.”*

“I was sleeping,” said Ilanya, “until I heard you coming down the stairs.” She eyed the dark back stairwell with obvious apprehension, remembering all the stories her parents had told her about them. The haunted back stairway—the stairs—the way she *never* went for any reason, where the dust lay heavy on the weathered wood and shadows lay in deep folds, shrouding the narrow way up.

Fedorov was gone.

Part II

Black Gold

"The myth of unlimited production
brings war in its train as inevitably
as clouds announce a storm."

—Albert Camus

Chapter 4

The trouble started far to the west in the Gulf of Mexico where men in hundreds of offshore oil platforms were working just a little harder after hurricane Victor rampaged through the region. Houston was still shut down, the spigots on pipelines, platforms and refineries all along the Gulf coast clamped tight. Over 80% of America's fuel system was now off line in the wake of the storm. That was going to put a whole lot of pressure on all overseas operations to make certain new supplies of crude were well out to sea and heading for the US to relieve inevitable shortages that were already cropping up in the southeastern and southern states.

Things were also heating up in the Caspian region, and the work in the fields there had seen several interruptions in the last few weeks due to security problems—situations that always got Ben Flack's blood boiling, because Ben was a Chevron "Company Man," and a schedule man when it came to moving the oil from one place to another. The work of all the other men, Toolpushers, Drillers, Roughnecks, Roustabouts, Derrickhands, and Mud Engineers, all deferred to him. Flack had the final say on all operations, answerable only to the other company men at Chevron headquarters back in the states.

Chevron's *Medusa* platform in the North Caspian region was on emergency watch again tonight, as local militants were threatening more attacks on rigs and pipelines to protest the ongoing incursion of corporate interests in the region. The old maxim of the oil industry was again proved brutally true: he who controls the routes of distribution will also control the producers. In Chevron's case, its production was in a very uncomfortable place as the war drums began to sound, and the routes of distribution were all too fragile. One of the last US producers in the Caspian, it stubbornly clung to its prized *Kairyan* fields at the southern fringe of the super massive Kashagan Oil & Gas Field Complex, and *Medusa* was the crown jewel, a platform every bit as big as *Thunder Horse* had been in the Gulf of Mexico.

Discovered over a decade ago, Kashagan was first thought to yield 13-15 billion barrels of oil, making it second only to Ghawar in Saudi Arabia. Extensive new surveys after 2018 had now discovered the fields there to be

much deeper and even more massive than previously thought. Superfield Kashagan was now the dominant player where oil was concerned, promising well upwards of 25 billion barrels of recoverable oil, and much more in reserve. While Ghawar in Saudi Arabia was aging and now needed water and gas infusion to extract its diminishing reserves, Kashagan was a new field in its adolescence, and set to transform the entire North Caspian region onto the most geopolitically strategic zone on earth. Ben Flack was sitting right in the middle of it on *Medusa*, aptly named, as the pipelines snaked out from the platform in all directions, feeding on the dark oil beneath the sea.

The pipelines were the arteries carrying the life blood of the developed world. They headed east to China, north to Russia, and along the Trans-Caspian Consortium route under the Caspian Sea to Baku before crossing Turkey to Ceyhan on the Eastern Med. What could not be sent by pipeline was also loaded directly onto shallow draft tankers and also moved to Baku, which had once again regained the great strategic prominence that it had in the 1940s when Hitler so coveted the oil there.

“Crap,” Flack said aloud. “Look at this goddamned wire on the Gulf situation. That’s going to make my life miserable. With *Thunder Horse* down, my ass is in the sling now for production. How am I supposed to move the damn oil with the locals threatening to raise hell out here?”

Here we just get our teeth into this field and the damn Chinese have to go and get a hair up their ass over these damn little islands, he thought. Sure it was for the oil survey rights, but how many barrels could there be? It would be years before they’d pump anything, but this little squabble was going to cause a headache for all the big producers too. Now every goddamned militant group from the Khazars to the PKK thinks they need to get in on the act here. Damn inconvenient to have Russian troops up north where they could swing down and cause some real mischief. If home office thinks a little shortfall of 20,000 barrels per day is a bother now, wait until the Russkies get here.

Chevron tried for a piece of the Caspian reserves in 2007, and failed much farther south. Then the company managed to sign a lucrative development contract in the thick of things up north at Kashagan in 2018. The Company’s slim profit margin was depending on the field’s production, and Ben Flack was the man in the chair when things started to heat up on the global stage. It was just his luck, and he ticked off his production numbers noting that the shortfall was becoming harder and harder to cover.

They were already 20,000 barrels off the pace because of the goddamned bunker busting, he mused. That was a term the locals used to describe their illegal sampling of oil from the ubiquitous pipelines crisscrossing the Caspian basin. Smugglers and militant groups, and even government controlled raiding parties would slip up to a line with a lighter full of empty barrels at sea or a truck with the same on land. Then they'd drill a hole and feed in some plastic tubing to milk the line. Just last week the Caspian District Police had a shootout with oil bandits, killing several militants, but that was old news in the region. As much as 10% of all the oil Chevron and other trans-nationals pulled out of the area ended up getting siphoned off by smugglers, the local mosquitoes sucking at the veins of the oil industry with their damned bunker busting.

So Ben's numbers were off this month, and he had crews working all the rigs associated with *Medusa* very hard tonight, in the hopes of making up for some of the enormous losses expected in the Gulf of Mexico with this odd late season hurricane. Pumping light was just not an option for him now. He had mid-level managers on the phone from headquarters in San Ramon, the Bollinger Canyon Boys as he called them, and the pressure was ratcheting up.

With plenty of well pressure from the competition, the Bollinger boys wanted to know why the numbers were down again from the Caspian? Ben Flack hated the thought of another long conversation about the lack of security for ongoing operations, the slow response time of the Kazakh Police in the region, let alone their military.

KAZPOL, the Mobile Police that patrolled the region in shallow drafted boats, was never there when you needed them, and never really reliable when they did manage to arrive on the scene in a timely manner. It was bad for numbers, and numbers were something Ben Flack understood all too well.

He was thankful that the US viewing TV audience had such a short attention span, for it kept the real world news off the radar screen for most Americans. While they were all busy dialed in to singers and chefs and job seekers on the Voice, the Taste, the Job, and dancing with the stars or wondering how they'd fare if they were washed up on some deserted island with a chance for a big payoff if they played the game right, Ben Flack dealt with the *real* world, the very real and compelling problem that he stared at every night and every morning in his production tables. How to keep those numbers up, nudge them yet higher, and keep the folks all nice and warm back home this winter? That was reality as he knew it, and it made for some

particularly uncomfortable nights on his rig, worrying over feeds and flows and well pressure and tanker traffic to the two big terminals on the coast—not to mention the pipelines.

Numbers were numbers, a cold hard reality that could not be remedied by going to a commercial break. He was on his own little island out here in the region, on a hulking metal platform in the middle of a shallow oil drenched sea. While the folks back home watched *Survivor*, he was the one with his butt in the chair so they could keep their thumbs busy on the remote. But things weren't so good on his little island tonight. Ben's numbers were down again, and if the situation got any worse in the next few days, with militants threatening to launch another major protest or two, he just might have to take the precaution of shutting *Medusa* down. That would take another 100,000 barrels off his production list for each day he was down—bad news for him, if not FOX or CNN. Bad news for the boys back in Bollinger Canyon, and bad news for the folks back home, though they would probably never hear much about it…Until their next trip to a gas station.

The worst of it all was the big shipment scheduled for this very weekend, an old rig from Baku that had been refurbished for operations. It was due to be set up tonight, and Crowley & Company, a highly specialized transport outfit, was already on the scene, moving in equipment they would need for the job. Crowley was able to get the platform all loaded on submersible barges and carefully prepared for the long tow job from Baku. Once on site, they would have no more than 48 hours to remove the sea fastenings and get the equipment shifted to the off shore shallows over the production site. Most of the work was scheduled for tomorrow night, at the dark of the moon. There was no sense inflaming the passions of the locals with a daylight move. Government officials had been paid off, a little KAZPOL security was in place, but with military units on heightened alert these last few weeks Ben was still worried.

Tempers were running at a fever pitch due to a new round of government operations in the sensitive northern border region. The Kazakh army was staging maneuvers, hoping to discourage any Russian movement south. Their 36th Air Assault Brigade had arrived from Astana to take up blocking positions on the few roads and rail lines leading into the production zone. If the Russians pulled some military muscle out of Astrakhan, Volgograd, Saratov or Samsara they might just mount a major overland offensive that could sweep down to the North Caspian and seize the whole of the super-

giant Kashagan field. That was the nightmare scenario that had bedeviled Western military planners for the last decade. How in the world could they defend the place? It was more vulnerable than Saudi Arabia had been when Saddam Hussein had gobbled up Kuwait.

Flack set his lukewarm coffee down on the desk and leaned back in his swivel chair. He was squinting out the Plexi window, watching a few wildcatters making adjustments to one of the platform well feeds. The platform itself was like the head of an octopus, well named as a great *Medusa* where new directional drilling technology allowed umbilicals to snake off in all directions and exploit sites three to five miles away. *Medusa* served as a collection point and flow station, surrounded by shallow grey green waters and shoals about ten kilometers north of the company bases at Buzachi and Fort Shevchenko. It was one of ten facilities Chevron had in the region, and a good number of them were under Ben Flack's watch tonight.

Ben was a short, burly man, with thinning grey hair offset by an equally close cropped grey beard. His forties had fattened him out a bit in the gut, but the extra weight only seemed to add more presence to his stocky frame. He removed his wire frame glasses, rubbing a sore spot on the bridge of his wide nose, and reached for a cheesecloth he kept in the desk drawer. With a careful motion, he cleaned the lenses as he craned his neck to look for Mudman.

"Hey Eddie," he said matter of factly. "Any word from Baylor on *Kalamakas*?" *Arkol* and *Kalamakas* were two other Chevron platforms in the region, along with *Medusa*.

Ed Murdoch was making an adjustment on his flow monitors, a computer controlled system running Honeywell-PlantScape and Allen Bradley's Monitoring system on Wonderware MMI. He had come up through the ranks, working landside operations as a Mud Systems Specialist years ago. Now he was the Control Systems Engineer for *Medusa*, though everyone still called him "Mudman" for an easy handle.

"Not a peep," he said.

"Well, he was supposed to call in over an hour ago."

"Probably still sleeping," said Mudman as he bit off the end of a granola bar and tossed the wrapping paper into his round file. The early morning light off the sea reflected through the Plexiglas storm windows and glinted on his hair gel. Eddie was the polar opposite of Ben Flack, a wiry, round shouldered man who kept his thin, dark hair slick and tight on his knobby head. Earplugs from his new Apple iPhone dangled from his lean face, and gave the

impression that he was permanently plugged in to his system monitors—an engineer Goth, complete with a vampire tattoo on his exposed left shoulder

“I don’t like this,” said Flak. He was rocking in his chair now, moving his bulk this way and that, and for all the oil in the North Caspian there was just not enough to prevent an annoying squeak each time he moved, which only added to the strain in his head right now.

“You worried about the locals again, or the Russians?” Mudman still seemed more interested in his granola bar than anything bothering Flack.

“It’s that damn, Kazakh militia again,” said Flack, venting his frustration. “Didn’t they round up the ringleaders back in August when we had to shut down?”

“Yup. Asshole called for the destruction of all Western Petroleum interests, or something like that. But that’s what got the locals all shit mouthed—they picked up one of their ring leaders and accused him of treason. Then the locals go ape shit and start taking it out on the oil companies.”

“Well, why the hell do they have to pick on *my* platforms?” Ben complained. “I got numbers to meet, here, and we’ve got an installation this weekend. What is it this time? What’s eatin’ those lard ass locals now?”

“Who knows,” said Mudman. “Could be those damn Khazar clansmen. Could be this talk of war and all. Remember, we’re east of Suez out here, Flakie. We’re sitting right on the frontiers of the Eurasian Alliance—SinoPac.”

“Yeah, right. Look at this shit on the wire.”

Flack was holding a Reuters news feed, where a statement from the Caspian Region People's Volunteer Force, or CRPVF for short. It was looking very threatening again. He put his eyeglasses back on and read aloud.

“We will unleash upon the government and its cohorts, violence and mayhem never before reported in the history of the Kazakh state. We will kill every iota of oil operations in the Caspian Region. We will destroy anything and everything. We herein order that all staff, property and operations in the Caspian Region be totally evacuated in the next 48 hours. Shell, Chevron, Mobil, Total and others should take note. Their installations will not be spared. We will come after everything, living and not living. Failure to comply will result in death, grave sabotage and every other unthinkable vice.”

“They’re coming after everything—living or not living?” Mudman had a

sarcastic grin on his face. “Failure to comply will result in every other unthinkable vice? Such eloquence. This guy sounds like he went to college!”

“Can you believe that shit?” Ben could think of a few vices he would like to revisit, but the threat implicit in this latest press release was rather pointed, and he reached for a bottle of chewable aspirin instead. “Forty-eight hours, they say, and I’ve got an installation to worry about now. Better get on the phone to Baylor,” he concluded. “I want to make sure he knows about this.”

“Think we ought to call KAZPOL first? I mean, it took them hours to get here in August.”

Flack’s anger and frustration ticked up another notch. “Christ, this is the last fucking thing I need this weekend, Mudman. I got Crowley off shore in six hours, and then we’ve got to move some heavy duty facilities inshore and get them anchored so the engineers can start setup first thing tomorrow. This is really the last fucking thing I need!”

“Right,” said Mudman, adjusting his iPhone headset. “I’ll call Baylor.” He reached for the phone, but it rang before he could lift the receiver.

“Now what?” said Flak with a frown. He had a deep misgiving that things were going to go from bad to worse, and he was right.

Chapter 5

If he thought *Thunder Horse* was bad, the news coming in now would make matters even worse. Mudman gave him a sheepish look, gesturing to the phone, as if afraid to touch it. Ben waved him off and picked up the receiver.

"Flack," he said, his voice flat as though he expected bad news. He was not to be disappointed.

"Ben? We've got another problem," came a voice. It was Wade Hanson, his Crowley representative supervising the big rig set operation inshore that night. Flack looked at his watch, mentally calculating where the rig should be by now, a full 24 hours after the move was started by the *American Salvor* and her escort of tugs.

Earlier that night, three *Invader* Class high-powered tugs made their way north to the field site. With engine for only a 150,000 pound pull, the *Invaders* were on the scene for steerage and positioning more than anything else. The real work was to be done by a much bigger vessel, an *American Salvor* class boat, capable of handling a 600,000 pound pull. The lighter boats would keep the cargo stabilized until it could be properly positioned at the production site. Then they would wait until the platform feet settled nicely on the silted bottom. The submersible barge would be floated out from underneath the platform, and Crowley would whisk its tugs south again, hopefully before daylight, well on their way back to Baku. The locals would awaken to see another massive, hulking metal shape deftly positioned by the tugs, another *de facto* occupation of turf, there to secure control of the oil and gas beneath it.

They would be another six weeks getting the platform up and running, retrofitting, repairing and positioning pipeline feeds. But, with any luck, the beachhead of this next invasion would be secured within 48 hours. That was the news the Bollinger Boys were really waiting on. The bothersome calls from middle-managers haggling with Bennie Flack over his pump numbers were only reflex. Ben knew the drill, and the drilling that went with it.

"They taking pot shots at you again?" he said to Hanson on the phone. There had been two separate incidents already, small arms fire from what looked to be a fishing trawler near the coast. Thankfully no one had been

hurt, though one of the *Invader* class tugs would be needing a new paint job and side window pane after the operation was complete.

"Forget about that for now. Haven't you heard yet?" The voice on the line was more urgent. *"They hit the pipeline again."*

That was just what he needed now, thought Flack, another pipeline explosion, with all the bad press, not to mention the cleanup. "Another bunker bust?" he asked. The constant pipeline attacks by smugglers on the landward side near the terminals often caused minor explosions and fires along the line. They were a nuisance, like the smugglers themselves, but seldom fatal to his flow chart numbers.

"Worse than that," said Hanson. *"They hit the BTC line in Turkey. Pretty good rip, from what I hear. I just got word myself on the radio."*

That got Flack's attention immediately. The BTC line was his main artery from Baku through Turkey to Ceyhan on the Mediterranean coast. There were supposed to be tankers waiting there in 24 hours to receive a long stream of black gold bound for US ports. If the BTC line went down, oil could not get to Ceyhan.

Hanson spelled out the details. The PKK, a Kurdish militant group that had a long history of targeting oil and gas operations to press its political agenda, had mounted a major operation at a key juncture in the long pipeline route, at Erzurum. They blew up a mile of pipeline and the oil road to Ceyhan was suddenly closed. Now the oil had only one way out if it was to ever reach a Western Alliance controlled port. It had to go all the way across Georgia to the Supsa terminal on the Black Sea Coast, and from there it would need tankers to get it down through the Bosporus and into the Aegean for ports serving either Europe or a long journey to the United States. Ben Flack was going to be a very busy man that night.

"Christ almighty," said Flack, clearly disturbed. "Now what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, Ben. Word is that this will take down the BTC line for at least two weeks, maybe even a month."

"A Month? It was that bad? Look, I've got a big shipment I have to get on the deep water and headed stateside, and soon. Now I'll have to route the damn thing through the Black Sea out of Supsa. You know what kind of a headache that will be with all this crap on the news about Russia and China? The Black Sea is a goddamn Russian lake!"

"I hear your pain, my friend," Hanson tried to sound sympathetic, but he

had worries of his own. *"Just be glad you aren't inshore like I am with these local running around with AK-47s."*

"Well I hope to God you're still on schedule with this rig delivery. Will we get that done tonight?"

"We're starting our set now. Bottom looks good and we'll be lowering the barge in a few hours. Should have that puppy floated out from under your baby by six PM. That is if we don't get any more trouble from the militants. Anyone starts shooting at us and I'm pulling my people out. Home office got wind of that pipeline blow and gave me an earful. That's why I thought I'd better call you first."

"Shit," Flack swore again. "Look, Wade, I need that rig set tonight. You hang in there, will ya? These guys get a hair up their ass for two or three days and then go home again. This business will all blow over and we'll get things moving again on the numbers. But I need that rig set, you hear me?"

"I'll do what I can," said Hanson. *"But you may have more on your hands here than my problems. That was a bad blow on the BTC line. If that isn't enough, we've got the fucking Russians rattling swords up north on the border. This could get ugly."*

Another phone was ringing, pulling at Flack's anxious attention. "Let me worry about the pipelines," he said quickly. "Look, I'll see if I can get KAZPOL out your way in case things get hot. You just set that rig, OK?"

"I'll call you in six hours."

"Right." Flack reached for the other phone, relieved to still its insistent ring. It was more bad news. Hanson had been right on target. The field engineers were already setting up a new delivery option to move the oil through the Trans Caspian line to Baku, bunker it there for a credit, and then have tankers pick up crude at the other end of the line. It was a common practice. Oil was already in the system. They just had to get the right to load it on a ship and sail merrily off for the US. Bunkering a couple million barrels at Baku would give them a hefty credit, and enough to buy an equal amount elsewhere. They just needed to find the tankers to move it from that point. He called Ceyhan to see about a credit, but with the line down for a month there was no chance he'd book anything there. So his only option was Supsa on the Black Sea coast south of Poti.

Flak leaned heavily on his desk and pulled up a production chart on his monitor. Forget his 20,000 barrel shortfall now. The migraine he had been fighting off for days was ripening. He could just hear the calls that would

soon be coming in from Bollinger Canyon, not to mention Merrill Lynch, Societe General, Bank of America, Credit Suisse, First Boston, Morgan Stanley, UBS, Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, and God knows who else. These were the money men who had heavy investments in the North Caspian, with big plans for a new LNG facility at the important new Shevchenko Terminal just down the coast.

Mudman had been outside with binoculars scanning the coast, now he came back in, scratching his stomach and yawning away sleep. “So what’s the bad news?”

“BTC pipeline is down and out.” Flack gave him the short version.

“Christ, Supsa too?”

“No, thank God the Trans-Georgia line is still open. Maybe we can get some flow through today. If that goes we’ll have to run a Bunker deal.”

“This sounds bad, Bennie. What if we can’t get a credit? Everyone and their mother is going to want the oil that’s already at the terminals.”

“No shit! That’s why we need to pump fast.”

“Well what about that rig set?”

“It’s still on schedule. But Hanson says the trouble is spreading. Russians on the border. Kazakh militias taking pot shots at facilities. Better tell the Rig Boss to break out his sidearm.”

“Sidearm? A lot of good that will do us if the Russians want to play patty cake out this way. Where’s KAZPOL? I thought they were going to tamp this local shit down.”

“They’re good for nothing idiots,” said Flack, his frustration evident. “This crap may get out of hand this time, Mudman. We may need a little more help than KAZPOL can provide. I’m going to see about getting some Mercs out here—off the record of course. Maybe some muscle from Blackwater would even the odds for us a bit, or the Timmermann Group. You tell the Rig Boss like I said.”

“You got it.” Mudman mimicked the firing of a pistol, blew the imaginary smoke from his index finger, and slouched off to the operations deck to pass on the word.

Flack settled into his chair, staring at the sheaf of production numbers he was about to fax to the Bollinger Boys. He scratched his head with a shrug, and penciled in a notation at the top of the first page. “Data assumes no facility damage, and relies on normal field flows and access to open pipelines, or that failing to adequate tanker traffic. See news feed attached.”

The news feed was the one intangible thing in Flack's world. He could handle everything they did at sea, and below ground where the rigs were working. It was that annoying news feed, those "events above the ground" as his colleagues called them, that always posed the real problem. His fax might buy him about twenty four hours, which was just the time he would need to get that rig set and see Crowley's tugs safely off to Baku again. The Bollinger Boys would Google up the news on the pipeline explosion, and then wait for his next report. In the meantime, he thought, he had better get a call in to Timmermann and his merry band of mercenaries.

There was a strange feeling in the air now, an uneasy pre-dawn quiet that was about to ignite. There were pipelines all over the region, fragile collection points, flow stations, rigs and well sites. And it was all sitting on a lot of flammable oil, with bands of hit and run militants sniping, burning and making ever more threatening statements in the local news outlets.

The statements soon coalesced into an organized resistance called the "Movement for the Emancipation of Caspian Central Asia," or MECCA. Guess who was likely to be behind a name like that? Damn Al Qaeda. The group was stiffened by a shadowy leadership structure, and their stated aim was to totally destroy Kazakhstan's capacity to export oil. To that end they had already walked a quarter of the mile. Exports were down sharply as MECCA tactics became more sophisticated each year.

The raids were more frequent, lightning quick speed boat attacks by well armed men wearing white turbans and black scarves to mask their faces. There were thousands of men like this available in this poverty stricken region, all easy hires for a day, a week, a single operation or more extended campaign. They filtered down from the general chaos in the desolate regions of the country, where roving bands the locals called 'Khazars' haunted the parched landscape.

Last year, before Flack's watch, Shell had to abandon facilities producing over 600,000 barrels per day, under relentless pressure from MECCA guerillas. When the attacks finally quieted down Shell engineers were sent in to reclaim the rigs and platforms, only to find much of the equipment was simply gone. In the area near the Karaton terminal alone, 35 miles of pipeline disappeared, disassembled by marauding gangs of dissidents, loaded onto barges, offloaded onto trucks, and then delivered to Chinese scrap metal dealers. There was always someone ready to feed on the ruin of another's misfortune, to turn a quick profit. It was literally a corporate world of dog

eating dog.

"This business will get out of hand," Flack murmured aloud. The Saudis would never leave their rigs in a situation like this. Here he was about to hire on *mercs* for protection that his own company, his own damn government and all the investment companies, had failed to provide—let alone the fledgling Kazakh government. They were so busy with local factional squabbles that there was little muscle in the Kazakh Army to enforce general order in the region.

They were lucky they had at least one Air Mobile Brigade out here to give the Russians second thoughts about crossing that border up north. But he knew if the Russians came they would roll with nothing less than a full Motor Rifle Division. When will those prissy Senators and Congressmen in DC get serious about this energy situation? Well, they'll learn where their bread is buttered in time, just like the folks back home. They'll learn there's only so much oil you can squeeze out of a rock, and that it cost a hell of a lot more than pumping it here. Things were tightening up in the Gulf, in the Caspian, and the Middle East had been running dry for years. That meant trouble at home would soon follow.

The next phone call confirmed Flack's worst misgivings. News was hitting the AP wire hard that morning. Royal Dutch Shell, the region's biggest developer, was reporting that the main pipelines serving their "Sunny Light" field were hit again, and now off line. The damage was cascading all through the region. Shell was taking over 650,000 barrels of daily production off line! All that would do is increase the pressure on him to deliver, and deliver big.

He squinted out of the foredeck pane and looked into the grey dawn. There was a char of black smoke smudged across the sky, probably the pipeline fire that the crews were trying to control. While he was out here on his rig running numbers and looking for a few men with guns to safeguard the traffic, the folks back home would be lining up at the shopping malls for the blowout pre-holiday season specials that were sucking in the last of their dollars. Americans would shop until the Chinese workers who made the goods they bought would drop.

Perhaps the old consumer society could keep from choking once again this Christmas. It would die off altogether soon enough. Maybe not this year, he thought, but they would all learn where their bread was buttered as well—and sooner than even he could imagine. The war he had heard about behind

all the distraction of these local events, was indeed more serious than he realized. In due course he would be faced with his worst case scenario…The Russians.

Chapter 6

Miles to the south, in the quiet port of Larnaca, Cyprus, the pipelines of the Caspian Sea were about to become entangled with the lives of a very special person, and a very tough sea captain on a very dangerous ship. It was a circumstance that would bring the Fairchild company into the midst of the gathering storm of war, and link its fate to that of many others who were now hot in the chase to find one very important man—Gennadi Orlov.

The quiet the lights of the city were glittering like jewels on the nearby harbor at Larnaca Bay, and belied the turmoil of the world that evening. The sea was calm, the night fair on the gloaming horizon, the skies clear and cloudless in the temperate Mediterranean climate of those first days of autumn, 2021. Captain Gordon MacRae was standing on the bridge of the corporate security vessel *Argos Fire* that evening, ready to finish his watch and retire to dress whites for an important dinner guest arriving soon.

MacRae knew nothing of the travails of Gennadi Orlov that night, but would soon come to know more than he ever desired. Fate was reaching out her hand and dragging pieces across the chessboard of time, both future an past, and MacRae, his ship, and the company it served were soon to be embroiled in the fight for the vital center of the board. He could see a part of what was coming. Lord, the headlines had spoken enough of the trouble that would darken his seas in the days and weeks ahead. Perhaps trouble is coming to dinner tonight, he thought, then put that aside to gaze out into the harbor an take in the quiet coming of the night.

At one time the port at Larnaca might have been considered large, particularly to the Crusaders who once used it as a waypoint before landing in the Holy Land. Situated on the island of Cyprus, the harbor was a balmy tourist destination in the Eastern Med. It would seem small by modern standards, a backwater with long seaside boulevards fringed with tall palms swaying in the gentle breeze, a harbor for cruise ships and ferries, and the occasional merchant marine vessel. The two small quays on the port were enough to accommodate three or four commercial ships at one time, and Captain MacRae had radioed ahead to be certain his berthing would be available that night.

There were only two other ships in port that day, the *Kristina Regina*, a

4300 ton cruise ship of Finnish registry with a maximum capacity of perhaps 350 people, and the Holland Americas Line *Rotterdam*, a much bigger cruise ship that was slated to depart three hours before *Argos* made port, taking most of the tourist traffic with it. That was just the way MacRae liked his visits: quiet night berthings, on low traffic days, where the sleek military lines of his vessel would not draw much attention from either locals or tourists.

He preferred things quiet and unobtrusive because that was the way his company exec wanted them—no fuss, no bother, just a quick in and out. They would make a few deliveries to the corporate offices that had been established here some months ago, things that would be delivered verbally, so as not to leave any trail on paper, or within the digital airwaves that could be intercepted by curious ears. Security was a primary concern in the global environment today, and Fairchild & Company took it very seriously.

Fairchild was a small independent oil company owned by the doughty lady who gave it her name. Elena Fairchild was aboard tonight, riding in the flagship of her small trading fleet and ready for dinner in the executive cabin where she was going to be entertaining a very special guest. So fuss and bother were certainly *not* on the menu tonight, and Captain MacRae had taken precautions to be certain everything would go smoothly. He knew the captain of the *Rotterdam*, and had radioed ahead to be certain she would slip away from the islands by 18:00 hours.

"Giving me the bums rush, Gordon?" the voice had come back. *"We'll be underway by 17:00 hours, if I can be satisfied that I've all my eggs in the basket."* Rotterdam was a massive ship, nearly 60,000 tons, and with five decks of passengers to look after. *"Not much action on the island tonight, however, so I don't foresee any problems—over."*

"Well enough," said MacRae, his in his lovely Scottish brogue sweet on the airwaves. "Then if you run her up to twenty knots for half an hour you'll scoot merrily out to sea, well before we break your horizon—and I've a case of Pinot Noir for you that I'm sure will add a wee bit of sparkle to your table —over."

"Ah, Gordie, twenty knots it is, my friend. You can drop it on the sky deck! I'll have crew out waiting. Shall we say 21:00 hours—over?"

"We'll be there," said MacRae. "Over and out." Then he turned to his Executive Officer, and inquired about the schedule that evening. "When is that helo comin' in from Alexandria?"

“Very soon, sir. Radar has a contact inbound now, about 100 miles out.” Commander Dean was all business, a lean, young officer that MacRae had plucked from the US Coast guard after his first tour of duty. Dean had been listening to the radio call with amusement. “Shall I have a package prepared, sir?”

“Right you are, Commander,” said MacRae. “Nice and quiet, mind you. Just tell the pilot that Fairchild wants a delivery made. And tell him to be timely about it, laddie.”

“Aye, Aye, sir.”

“I’d best get down to my cabin to dress.” Captain MacRae would be meeting the inbound guest, and escorting him to the Fairchild executive dining room.

“Black mess jacket with tails?” Commander Dean inquired casually.

“Not tonight,” said MacRae. “It’ll be white with black bow tie. Fairchild still thinks it’s summer, even though it’s creeping in to autumn. Mediterranean waters have this effect on her, eh?”

“And what the lady wants…” Dean began.

MacRae’s smile was enough of an answer as he left.

“Captain off the bridge,” the boatswain called.

“Right you are,” said MacRae, returning a salute as he went.

Sometime later he had cleaned up and donned his dress whites, complete with gold braid work on the cap. He loved the uniform, the cut of the waistcoat, the crisp contrast of the badges and insignia with their solid bright colors. For formal occasions, his captain’s bars moved from their usual position on the sleeve to shoulder boards, to be just a bit less obtrusive while dining. It was a way of smoothing out the marshal tones, adding a bit of civility to the job from time to time. But no matter how he dressed, he remained a military man underneath, just as his ship remained a dangerous and highly effective fighting vessel, no matter how her lines had been smoothed in the overhaul.

He was Captain of the *Argos Fire,* and his charge was a fleet of seven company tankers that worked routes from the Gulf and the Turkish coast and back to their home ports at Terminal 11 in Barrow, and Milford Haven. Fairchild Enterprises did a healthy business bringing fuel to the UK, and it was getting healthier all the time. Elena Fairchild was a meticulous master, and after a company tanker had been caught in the middle of a running gunfight between Iranian swift boats and Omani coast Guard corvettes on a

run into the Persian Gulf, she had decided that three million barrels of very expensive crude oil needed a little looking after.

While all her ships were double hulled MARPOL tankers, a few armor piercing rounds in the wrong place could make for some very unpleasant sailing. She wanted protection, particularly since she strained to acquire her largest tankship, the *Princess Royal*, with three times the capacity of any other vessel in her fleet. Things Elena Fairchild wanted, were usually delivered in short order—with gold ribbons in the bargain.

The delivery that had fulfilled this particular desire, one for safe passage on seas that were becoming ever more dangerous in a world scraping for every drop of oil it could find, had been the *Argos Fire*. That was not the ship's original name, but MacRae found it fitting to the task. *Argos* was the Gaelic watcher, a shepherd with a hundred eyes, and this ship was his watchful fire—it summed up the role of the vessel well enough. To mix the Greeks into the mythology, he called the little band of heroes who crewed for him 'the Argonauts.'

The trim lines of his newly fitted ship had been designed by British naval architects, with first steel cut in August of 2004. The ship launched as *Dauntless*, a Type 45 Air Defense Destroyer, one of the largest ever built for the Royal Navy at 8000 tons. She served well until a design flaw in her hull and keel was discovered in 2017, and she was laid up at Portsmouth. Removed from active service, the proud vessel languished while the British haggled over how to find the money to refit her. The Russians were not the only nation feeling the financial pinch. In the end, it was decided to scrap her, and scavenge the equipment for other destroyers of the same class.

After the attack on her tanker, Elena Fairchild went looking for a fighting ship to set her mind at ease. She approached the government with a proposal to purchase the ship outright for use as her floating corporate HQ and as maritime security for her growing fleet of oil tankers, and soon cut a deal. The ship was towed to BAE Systems Maritime Shipbuilders on the River Clyde, the original contractors on the *Daring* Class Destroyers, and Fairchild paid a handsome sum for priority berthing in a naval dry dock and a complete overhaul, much of it financed by the Bank of London. There it was converted to the sleek new vessel that MacRae captained now, and three years later it moved to anchor off company facilities at Port Erin on the Isle of Man, renamed the *Argos Fire*. He wondered what the price would be for the rename one day, and hoped the ship would not be asked to pay while he stood

the watch.

But *Argos* was a ship fully capable of taking care of herself. MacRae was standing on the deck of one of the most dangerous destroyers ever to sail the high seas, and that thought always put just a bit more starch in his collar. All the old British armament that had made the ship so deadly had been removed, of course, but Fairchild Enterprises was a well diversified company. One of her subsidiary ventures was an arms manufacturing operation servicing the Royal Navy. *Argos Fire* was therefore fitted out with a company modified, and vastly upgraded version of the *Viper* air defense system, advanced Sampson radars, and two 4.5" Mark 8 guns, well disguised and fully retractable below the fore and aft deck on a clever hydraulic lift system. She even had sophisticated sonar equipment and anti torpedo defense systems and, for some serious longer range punch, Fairchild had pressed a new ship-to-ship missile prototype into sea trials on the *Argos Fire* shortly after her maiden voyage, the GB-7, or *Gealbhan* for 'Sparrow.' Faster than the British *Sea Eagle,* it was a hypersonic sea skimmer much like the deadly Russian *Sunburn* missile, and it put the fire into the ship's name to be sure.

Largely gutted, with the interior completely rebuilt above the waterline, the ship now housed corporate offices at sea, and with lavishly appointed executive cabins, a full dining room, library, data center and expanded hanger space aft for four helos. To round things off, Ms. Fairchild insisted on a small company of her very own security men, all ex-military types sworn to their new posts in a secret ritual that none would ever openly discuss. This fifty man contingent of Argonauts sailed with the ship at all times, and they were outfitted with a small flotilla of fast boats for offshore and inshore service. Dressed always in commando black, the men were a formidable presence when deployed on any security mission requiring their particular talents.

As he stepped out on the aft helo deck Captain MacRae noted that he was a good match for his ship, where a liberal use of naval white now covered her newly tapered lines. The more military colors, blues, grays, hazard schemes and dazzle paint, were not to be her dress code, ever again. *Argos Fire* was wearing dress whites in the service of Elena Fairchild now, and she would have to mind her manners in the bargain, just like the Captain and crew. But a ship never really could change her true temperament, no matter how she was rigged. MacRae could still feel the raw strength of the metal under his feet, the surging power her new engines were capable of, and he knew, more than any other, just how indelicate his vessel could be if it ever came to a brawl on

the high seas in the service of the company—the reason *Argos Fire* had been built in the first place.

It was a dangerous world out there, on both land and sea now that the long discussion of Hubbert's Peak had finally resolved itself into an ever more serious decline in oil production figures. Peak oil was a reality that was now self-evident, and no amount of rock squeezing 'fracking' was going to change that. All the world's major fields were in decline, Ghawar in Saudi Arabia, Burgon in Kuwait, Cantarell in Mexico, the Russian fields administered by Lukos, and forget the North Sea. Only the massive young superfield of Kashagan in the Caspian was still viable, yet that area was now a hotbed of political contention—soon to be military contention, he thought. Britain, once a net exporter of oil, was now slowly starting to feel like Japan, relying more and more on imports.

The Royal Navy ain't what she used to be, MacRae thought. The sun had long since set on the British Empire as well—it was setting, in fact, on the American Empire at this very moment, though you couldn't get a neocon worth his salt to admit that. This is why small producers and shippers like Fairchild were becoming more and more important in the service to the Crown. They filled and guarded the oil tankers, and brought the energy home to a still gluttonous society that was just starting to catch a glimmer of the truth about the world's energy situation.

But for now, decked out in his dress whites, Captain Gordon MacRae had more pleasant things to consider. It was nigh on four bells, eighteen hundred hours, six PM, well into the mid-watch. The *Rotterdam* was long gone, its captain probably still thinking about that case of Pinot Noir. The *Argos Fire* had slipped into the harbor for its brief visit and the helo from Alexandria was ready to land. His guest would be waiting, the dining hall would be receiving soon, and he thought he had better get moving.

He stopped by the radio room on his way to check on local wire traffic. "Anything that might spoil my dinner on the black line?" he asked his radio man, Simms. The black line was for Intelligence feeds, connected to some very secure sources.

"No good news tonight," said Simms. "The Chinese are up in arms and ready to set sail for Taiwan, the Russian Navy has surged in the Pacific and Norwegian Sea, there's trouble in the Gulf of Mexico and on the BTC pipeline through Turkey."

That got MacRae's attention at once. "The BTC line?"

“Bunker bust, Captain, and a big one. The PKK claims responsibility, and early reports are that they blew up a mile of pipeline and shut the whole line down.”

“I see…” MacRae remembered a conversation he had with his Intelligence Master, Mack Morgan, two days ago. It seems they had picked up word that an attack was coming, but like all terrorist threats the target was difficult to nail down. Miss Fairchild won’t like that news, he thought. He knew she was here to look for a conveyance contract from Ceyhan, the terminal port on the BTC line, which stood for Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan.

“And one more message, sir,” Simms scratched his head. “Not sure what to make of it. It’s another undisclosed threat in the Persian Gulf.”

“Again?” MacRae shook his head.

“Something about the Straits of Hormuz, sir.”

“Well let me have it.” He took the decrypt, scanning it briefly and seeing a word there that gave him a chill…*mines*. He folded it quickly, slipping it into his pocket.

“I’ll see that her ladyship is informed,” he said quietly.

But she won’t like it, he thought as he went. She won’t like it one bit. She hustled three tankers out of bed last week and got them into the Med as though the company’s life depended on it. Some big operation is in the wind, no doubt, and she was counting on the BTC line delivering the goods. Trouble in the Gulf of Mexico, trouble on the BTC line, trouble in the Persian Gulf. Someone was making a rather obvious and deliberate effort to shut down all the vital oil and gas centers of the world. Mack Morgan had the first two on his black network days ago, but this bit here in my pocket is going to cause more than a few wrinkles in the plan. *Princess Royal* is in the Persian Gulf with a belly full of oil…Mines?

Trouble…He could feel it. MacRae’s Scottish nose had a sense for danger like few other men, and he knew that before the night was over *Argos Fire* would be sailing into very dangerous waters.

Part III

The Martyr

"It is the cause, not the death, that makes the martyr."

~Napoleon Bonaparte

Chapter 7

“Listen, my friends,” said Mironov. “If you think you aren’t being watched, you are deluded. They watch everyone now, particularly on the trains. It’s the only way you can get from one place to another, and so the stations and coaches are crawling with Okhrana.”

The three men sat at the table, leaning heavily over their half eaten breakfast, deep in conversation. Mironov nodded gravely as he finished, dipping a piece of sourdough bread into his *kasha* grain porridge. “Particularly you,” he pointed a finger at the young British reporter as the third man, a tall Uzbek guide, sopped up his egg yolk with a piece of bread. “Foreigners get special attention.”

“I see,” said the reporter, a man named Thomas Byrne, speaking passable Russian, and enlisting the aid of his guide when he needed help. He looked over his shoulder, as if he might see a security agent leering at him from another table, but they were the first to arrive in the dining room that morning, a few minutes before seven, and the hotel was not heavily booked in any case. Even so, images of people he had seen on the long journey, lean faced, bearded men in black overcoats and dark Ushankas, haunted his memories.

“Ask him why the government would want to bother with the likes of me. I’m just a commoner, here to report on the Great Race for the Times of London.” Byrne decided to put his guide to work so he could focus on his porridge.

Mironov spoke again, half smiling. “A commoner, he says.” The young man smiled at him. “Where foreigners are concerned there are no commoners. Every last one is suspect. I have little doubt that you were followed every mile and step of your journey, from the moment you set foot in our country, my friend. And you must be very cautious, because they will find out what you write and report, and if they don’t like it…” He let that dangle for a moment, a grin on his face. “Well, you could end up in prison, just as I did.”

“You were imprisoned? What for?” asked the reporter, Thomas Byrne, his eyes bright with curiosity.

Mironov was a young man too, handsome, with a broad forehead, dark hair and thin moustache. He had an energy and vitality about him that was very compelling, and his eyes seemed like dark fire when he spoke.

"For saying things the government didn't like. We were operating a small printing press—very secret of course. If that were found it would land me right back in prison again. I was only just released, you see. It was a long fourteen month sentence imposed on me for simply distributing leaflets. It is clear that I have long ago been labeled an enemy of the State, and so I have little doubt they will be looking for me again soon. I told them I was going south to Novosibirsk, and then traveled east instead to throw them off the scent. But they are everywhere. They will find out where I am again in due course."

"Very disturbing," said Byrne with a sigh. It seemed to him that his little adventure in Siberia was going to be dangerous after all, and he chided himself that he had ever thought otherwise. He clearly remembered that morning when he had been summoned to the publisher's office by Mister Harmsworth himself, and handed the assignment of a lifetime.

"Now see here, Mister Byrne," Harmsworth had said with a determined glint in his eye. "I understand that you are an enterprising man, with a good nose for a story. I also learned that you speak Russian. At least I've been told as much. Is that so?"

"Well, sir. Yes, I can manage a bit. My grandmother was Russian, and she taught me when I was very young."

"Excellent! Then I have a job for you, my good man. If I'm to turn this mess of a newspaper around—and I will turn it round, mind you—then we'll need something gripping right out of the gate. This Great Race is going to be a big story this year, so I'm sending *you*," he pointed.

Harmsworth's eyes were seeing out to some distant horizon that no other man could glimpse, much less appreciate. When he spoke he would fix a man with a steady gaze, a projection of his will and the energy of his personality, all backed by his considerable girth. His short brown hair also caught the light, slicked back and neatly parted on the right side, as was his habit. The buttons on his suit coat glittered as well, along with the silken thread in his tie and the starched white collar of his shirt. All in all, the light seemed to treat him well, surrounding him with an aura, a presence, a glow of power and privilege to which he was all too well suited. And now his glimmering regard was turned on the naive young Byrne, who swallowed heavily before he

answered, his voice a mere squeak compared to the deep baritone of Harmsworth.

“Me, sir?” said Byrne. “All the way to Siberia?”

“Where else? All the American papers will be in on the start of the race in New York, and the European papers will be huddled in Paris for the finish, but we're going to be right in the thick of things—in the heat of the action as it were. Can you imagine it, Byrne? You'll be right there in the greatest wilderness on earth watching them slog their way through all that tractless wasteland. You get the picture? Man versus the elements, right? The triumph of will and man's engineering over even the most formidable obstacles. Why, this Cook fellow is headed for one pole even as we speak, while Shackleton is heading for the other! The public will love this lot, but we don't have a man on either story, and that's one reason the *Times of London* has nearly gone the way of garbage wrappings these days. Well, now that I have acquired the paper all that is about to change. And you, my man, are going to help me change it.” Harmsworth poked the young reporter on his shoulder.

“We're going to be right in the middle of this race to report on the story when these men are at their wits end—at the last extreme—lost in Siberia.” He ran his hand along the headline he imagined, left to right in front of his face. “It will make wonderful reading, I'm sure of it. So you are just the man to take us all there with the story. You leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? But sir...The race has only just begun. They have to cross the whole of the American continent first, and then get over the Bering Strait before they come anywhere near Siberia.”

“Which gives you ample time to get there and find the best angles on this story. Talk to the locals, drum up some excitement. You'll know what to do.”

“But what if they never even make it that far, sir? I'll go all that way for naught.”

“Oh, they’ll make it, Byrne. Mark my words. These Americans have as much pluck as they have gall. They'll get to San Francisco, and find some way to make it into Asia, I'm sure of it. And if the Americans get that far, then the others will too—particularly the Germans. It's a pity that England won't have a car in the race. I’ve half a mind to have my own shipped over to New York so I could teach them all a thing or two about drive and perseverance. But I'll be too busy here getting the *Times* back on its feet. So I'm sending *you*, Mister Byrne.” Harmsworth tapped the younger man on the shoulder yet again, his point well made.

Thomas Byrne sighed heavily, realizing he had gotten himself in it up to his britches this time—up to his hatband! When he pushed his name forward on the list for story assignments, he could never have imagined this one. Siberia? How in the world would he get there? How would he find these racing cars in all that emptiness? Wasn't there a war on? Weren't the Russian and Japanese still stewing over things in that region? Wasn't a revolution brewing in Moscow and St. Petersburg? The suddenness of the proposition took him by surprise. One minute he was thinking of a nice Earl Grey tea and cakes, and the next he got word from Old Bingsley at the Editor's desk to get up to Harmsworth's office on the double.

"Sir…" he began tentatively, his mind still wandering over the plethora of dangerous possibilities in the journey. "I wonder if the Russian authorities would even allow—"

"You just leave that to me, Byrne. I'll arrange everything. You'll have proper papers waiting for you at the front desk tomorrow morning—passport, visa—it's all been arranged. There'll be a hundred pounds in an envelope for you, and fifty more in gold coin should the need arise. That first lot is against your normal salary, I might add, so don't get extravagant. But the coinage is yours to do with as you see fit. Think of it as a bonus for hazardous duty." Harmsworth squinted as he looked down at Byrne's shoes. "I'd say you would do yourself well to invest in a pair of sturdy boots, my man. There's likely to be a good bit of mud over there. Miserable roads, or so I hear. Now then… You'll take a ferry to Dunkirk, of course, then go by train to St. Petersburg. Stop wherever you like along the way, but make the money last." He held up a finger on that last point.

"From St. Petersburg you can book passage on the new Siberian Railroad. It will take you all the way out to the hinterland—Tomsk is the place. Book yourself into a decent hotel somewhere and then have a good look around. If you can get further east before the racers reach that area, then all the better. I want you out in the middle of nowhere with a keen eye and a sharp witted pen, eh? Get familiar with the place. Find a good guide or porters if you need them. And I expect to get regular reports by wire. This isn't a pleasure trip, Byrne. You are in the employ of the *Times of London* the whole way through. Don't forget that. I have every confidence in you."

Byrne fiddled with his hat, a hapless and forlorn look on his face. "Thank you, sir," he managed. What else could he say? Harmsworth was already somewhat of a legend in the publishing business, and one of the most

influential men of the day.

The more Byrne thought about this sudden new assignment, the more it dawned on him that there was real opportunity here for the sake of his own fledgling career as well. He could get out of the newsroom for a change and do some real reporting. No more jostling with copy boys, though he would miss a few of those fresh young faces. No more listening to irascible old Margaret on the circulation desk reading addresses back to customers on the telly. No more questions from Aunt Agony for the reader's daily advice column. As he thought about it, it was actually beginning to feel a bit exciting! He blinked away his fears, and extended his hand to shake on the matter, accepting his assignment as he knew he would in the end. Yet instead of a handshake Harmsworth reached into his pocket and produced a thick rolled cigar, slipping it into his palm with a smile.

“Enjoy it,” he winked. “The trip *and* the cigar. Take good care of that. It's a real Marcella brand, the landmark of enjoyment. Get the gullyfluff out of your pockets and keep it safe. Smoke it when you first set eyes on Siberia. It'll do you some good and put a bit of the dash-fire in you.” He looked at his watch. “Well now, that will be all, Byrne. Take the rest of the day off and get yourself squared away. But be here by six sharp in the morning. We'll have a car take you to the ferry. Cable me the first Monday each week and advise on your progress. Off you go now.” He waved at the door, his attention already diverted to a sheaf of papers on his thick mahogany desk top.

“Very well, sir,” Byrne stammered. “You can rely on me, sir.” He made a slow retreat to the frosted glass door and slipped out, back in the hall before he ran his hand through his thick sandy blonde hair and straightened the fold of his brown herringbone tweed coat. Siberia! Where in the world was he going? He had a thousand things to do before the morning came. He had to settle his rent with Mrs. Jameson and see if she would be willing to hold his flat for a few months or even longer. Those extra fifty pounds in gold coinage would make for easy inducement. He was sure he had no worries there. She could see to his mail, and notify anyone who came along as to his whereabouts.

Beyond that, he had to consider the journey itself. What would he need? Harmsworth's comment about a pair of good boots made perfect sense. And he resolved to head over to Ponsy's Clothiers and footwear at once. He would need a heavier coat, his own being quite threadbare these days. Gloves, scarves, sweaters, wool trousers and socks, warm long underwear, a decent

hat or two…The list ran through his mind now. And he would have to pack a respectable Dopp Kit as well: comb and brush, shaving kit, shampoo, razors, nail clippers, cologne, some Calox tooth powder, a few good bars of soap and an extra pair of specs. Should he pick up one of those nifty Clarke's Pyramid Food warmers—good for hot water, tea, warming up small tidbits of food or even use as a convenient night lamp? Perhaps an authentic Samovar in Russia would do just as well, and be much cheaper in the bargain.

He remembered an advertisement he had seen in the paper the other day —Mappins & Webb *Newmarket Crocodile Suitcase* fitted with every requirement for the gentlemen. It was all of forty-five pounds, however, and well beyond his means, even counting in the hundred-fifty pounds he was to receive in the morning. He would have to use his old luggage, but that decided, the excitement of this imminent voyage began to well in him.

He remembered how he had hurried down the long hallway, practically floating down the steps, his fears allayed, his heart lightened and the thirst for adventure and discovery on him. Yet as he hastened past the front desk he spied a headline that roused a faint stirring of unrest in him. “The Fatal Journey of Mylius Erichsen,” read the headline. The story was being written by another staff writer, about the Danish author and arctic explorer noted for his expeditions mapping out the coasts and fiords of Greenland—the *'Land That Is Lonelier Than Ruin.*' He had been misled by an older map, became lost, and perished from lack of food before he could right the error and safely navigate his way home.

Where in the world am I going? Again the question roiled to life in his mind. Siberia? He could vanish into that wilderness and never be seen or heard from again. A staff writer would pen his thin eulogy: “The Fatal Journey of Thomas Byrne,” and that would be the end of him—the end of all his ambitions, his dreams of success as a writer, his hope for love, family, children in some warm distant future he could scarcely even imagine now.

Yes, he thought. I could be swallowed alive by the frozen taiga, or end up in the belly of a big Siberian wolf! I might flounder in a muddy bog, or be eaten alive by mosquitoes when the land thaws. I might be waylaid on the road by a band of bloody, heartless Cossacks. It was enough to rattle the nerves of even the most hardy and manly people he could imagine. Yes, all of that could happen, or worse. He could not have known what actually *would* happen to him, something more outlandish than he could even imagine.

But not today…Today he was sitting in a hotel dining room in a small

town east of Krasnoyarsk, as far east as he could get, just as Harmsworth had urged him. He had already interviewed the leading American race team on the speedy ‘Thomas Flyer’ car. They had stolen a march on the Germans and had pushed on to Tomsk to the east two days ago. The Germans were in second place, 234 miles behind as they pulled into Ilanskiy late the previous evening, and they were all undoubtedly still sleeping in their rooms upstairs at this very moment. It was a quiet morning, the days impossibly long with the sun rising at a little past three in the morning, local time, because at the 60th parallel they were as far north as Anchorage Alaska or Scapa Flow above Scotland back home.

Then, as he leaned in to listen to this strange young Russian man who called himself Mironov, Byrne saw an impossibly bright light fill the room, instinctively raising his arm to shield his eyes.

“What in God’s name—” There came a loud roar in the distance, an awful tearing sound as if the sky itself had been ripped open and something came burning through, a wild, scintillating light in the heavens, brighter than the morning sun. They heard a tremendous explosion, and minutes later a violent wind was blowing outside, sending a hail of debris flying as the dining room windows shattered. Mironov jumped at the sound, covering his head, his face nearly in the remnant of his boiled eggs and porridge. The Uzbek guide was so startled he fell right off his chair with a hard thump on the bare wood floor. There were frightened shouts outside, and cries from the second floor of the building where the German race team must have received a shocking wake up alarm. Byrne heard footfalls on the ceiling above and the sound of men clomping down the main stairs, speaking in loud, fearful voices: “*Was fur ein gerausch? Was ist passiert? What is that sound? What is happening?*”

They were all up and rushing outside to join the startled townspeople near the rail yard, gaping at the sky to the northeast and shirking from a distant, deep rumble like thunderous artillery. Just a few seconds after they left, there were other footfalls on the back stairway and a man emerged, equally startled, holding a pistol out in front of him with fearful eyes. He stood there, taking in the dining room, the solitary table set for breakfast, the tea trembling in the half filled cup, the shards of broken glass…

It was Fedorov.

Chapter 8

Admiral Volsky remembered how his pulse had raced when he heard that awful sound, flat and dull, a body falling on the hard concrete floor of the Naval Logistics Building. *Someone else was there!* Then he heard the sound of something being moved, his eyes widening as he tried to imagine the scene. He knew immediately what was happening. It was a body being dragged! There was another rattle of metal, a crisp zipping sound and someone grunting with physical effort. Then he heard a door of a metal bin close, and the clopping footfalls receded, echoing as they faded away.

Silence…Dark, awful silence.

Volsky waited, but he knew what had happened. He strained to hear more, the phone receiver pressed tightly to his ear. The Lieutenant he had sent to open Fedorov's storage bin knew he was waiting on the line, and when the man did not return to the phone Volsky knew the worst.

Someone else was there, he thought. *Someone was waiting there!* Did they know what we were doing or was this merely happenstance? No, it had to be planned. There might be a night watch at the building at that late hour, just after midnight, but he could think of no reason they would dare interfere with his Lieutenant. So it had to be someone else, but who? Who was curious about his ship and crew? He had his answer in a heartbeat, and he knew that the Inspector General and his meddlesome intelligence officer had to be behind this. Yes. That was the only scenario that made sense. It was Kapustin and his lap dog Captain Volkov. They had been rudely rebuffed in their effort to unravel the mystery of *Kirov's* disappearance, and they were not happy about it. He had little doubt that they still had men watching the ship in those last hours before the fleet sailed, and they had probably shadowed Fedorov's operation at the Primorskiy Engineering Center as well.

He slowly put the receiver back in its cradle, and reached for another phone, thumbing a secure line, his pulse quickening.

"Security," came the voice.

"Admiral Leonid Volsky here. Please send a detachment of five Marines to my office at once."

"Yes, sir… Is there a problem, Admiral?"

"Five Marines, please, on the double."

“At once, sir.”

The Admiral realized that if his adversaries were willing to do what he had just heard on the phone line, then his own life could be in jeopardy. He summoned Marines that night, first for his own security, sending orders down to the staff that no one was to be admitted to the executive level of the building without his expressed approval and that anything unusual, any request for entrance by Naval Intelligence or military personnel, was to be reported to him immediately. He knew that battle lines were being drawn somewhere. Kapustin would not be able to challenge him alone. He would need the full weight of the Naval Intelligence Division and Internal Affairs to push anything. As a Fleet Admiral Volsky had tremendous power, controlling a wide range of military assets, and he intended to use them to defend himself and the mission they had planned, come what may.

When the Marines arrived he told the Sergeant in charge to assemble a twenty man detachment and secure the Naval Logistics building in Vladivostok. Guards were to be posted, particularly on the floor with Fedorov’s storage bin. No one was to be admitted… absolutely no one. A phone call would be made nightly to the Sergeant at Arms there and a man would be quietly instructed by Volsky to check bin number 317. There would be no one lurking in the shadows from that day forward, not as long as he remained in command here.

The following morning they discovered the Lieutenant he had sent to retrieve Fedorov’s message, if one was there. The man was found drugged and still groggy outside the “Kulmart” company department store a few blocks down from the old Logistics Building. He remembered nothing, and could provide no clue as to who had assailed him, how he got there, or what he was even supposed to be doing that night. A careful search of his person turned up no documents, though Volsky did not expect to find anything. It was obvious that the man had been searched before he was left there by the assailants and that anything he may have had was taken.

So if there was a note from Fedorov, thought Volsky, then they know about it. Kapustin…He must have learned much more than they believed. That man was very thorough in the discharge of his duties, but what would he make of Fedorov’s note? It would seem an insignificant bit of nonsense and be dismissed, or so the Admiral believed. The operation now underway in the Caspian was another matter. If Kapustin had men watching the Primorskiy Engineering Center, then they would have seen the device they removed from

the reactor test bed facility. They would have followed the column of trucks to the airport with some curiosity and great interest. The presence of a strong security team from *Kirov* would have aroused more than one suspicion, not to mention the radiation safe container the trucks were carrying to the big transport plane.

Discrete inquiries would have turned up the destination—Uytash airfield at Kaspiysk on the west coast of the Caspian Sea. That would have raised more than a few eyebrows. If Naval Intelligence was involved, they would have assets in that region as well. Volsky had to assume that they would soon have men closely watching his detachment and reporting. Once Dobrynin and his Marines embarked for the offshore anchorage of the *Anatoly Alexandrov* they would be more secure. His adversaries would soon discover that his good friend Admiral Kamilov in command of the Caspian Flotilla was involved and they would double their watch. Wartime security measures would be a good cloak, but if Naval Intelligence got pushy they had a lot of clout. He urged Kamilov to beef up security and delay any attempt to interfere with the operation as long as possible.

"I will do whatever I can, Leonid," said Kamilov. *"But if Moscow intervenes with a direct order…"*

"I understand," said Volsky, hanging up the phone with deep misgivings. Yes, Moscow…what would they know about all of this, and when would they know it? Those questions weighed heavily on his mind now. For that matter, what did Kapustin know? The Admiral did not have long to wait. The following day he received a call from building security stating that the Inspector General was requesting permission to see him in his office. So the game was up. Volsky gave permission for Kapustin to come up to the executive level, alone, and he also made sure he had adequate security posted at every access point along the way.

A few minutes later his Chief of Staff buzzed him to say his visitor had arrived and the Admiral seated himself at his desk, a revolver in the drawer close at hand should he need one. He did not think that Kapustin would consider doing anything extreme, but given the circumstances he was taking no chances.

"Good day, Inspector," said Volsky when the man finally entered. Kapustin nodded, with a wan smile and slowly removed his fedora. "Please be seated." Volsky made as if everything was routine. "I assume this has something to do with your report on *Kirov*."

“That would be a good guess, Admiral,” said Kapustin. He seemed tired, a bit frazzled, as though he had not had much sleep.

“May I offer you something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” Kapustin pinched the bridge of his nose, then got right to the point. “Admiral Volsky, I know you to be a very responsible officer, much admired, greatly respected.”

“You are too kind, Inspector.”

“Yes, well those pleasantries aside I thought I would deliver your mail this morning.” Kapustin reached slowly into his coat pocket, and the Admiral tensed up, his hand drifting to the edge of the drawer where his revolver was hidden. But Kapustin simply produced a plain white envelope, leaning forward and placing it on the desk. Volsky’s heart leapt as he eyed it, knowing exactly what it must be. He reached and took it up, seeing it had been opened, and noting how old and faded the seal was. He reached inside, slowly removing a small folded letter and opened it, immediately recognizing Fedorov’s handwriting.

“Admiral Volsky… If you are reading this then know that we have arrived safely at our destination, and will now proceed with our mission to rescue Orlov at Kizlyar. Should circumstances permit it, look for us along the Caspian coast on or after October 15, 1942. May God be with you all. – Captain Anton Fedorov.” Another brief notation was added at the end: *“Bukin failed to arrive. We hope he is safe with you.”*

Volsky smiled inwardly, elated that Fedorov had reached his destination safely. Now the only question was whether he could arrange his return. The events were mounting up in the Pacific, tension rising by the hour. The report he had received on the *Tigr* in the Gulf of Mexico was most disturbing, and he immediately called the commander of the Northern Fleet to see why the sub was sent there. The answer was equally disturbing, but not unexpected—Moscow had ordered it, ordered the deliberate destruction of one of the world’s largest offshore oil platforms, a facility critical to British Petroleum operations in the Gulf. And Moscow had ordered elements of the 58th Army to mobilize on the northern border of Kazakhstan as well. Moscow was holding a knife to all the vital energy centers the West depended on. He had little doubt that there would soon be an incident in the Persian Gulf as well.

Yet for the moment he had another problem, Gerasim Kapustin, Inspector General of the Russian Navy. He looked at the man, wondering how much he really knew and what he was hoping to determine with this meeting. He

decided to say nothing and let the other man make the next move. Kapustin was only too happy to oblige.

“Care to explain that note?” he asked. “Care to explain what this Fedorov is doing on the Caspian coast, and how he could be seeking a man reported as killed in action during my inspection?”

Volsky fixed him with a level stare, still wondering what he might know. “I’m afraid that there are certain matters I am not at liberty to discuss, Inspector.”

“Yes, your Captain Karpov made that painfully clear the last time we spoke. Needless to say I took the liberty of discussing that note with someone who *might* know about this matter.”

“It was you who ordered my Lieutenant waylaid in the dark at the Naval Logistics building?” Volsky’s displeasure was obvious on his face.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Your duties aside, Inspector, that was highly inappropriate. The man was assaulted and drugged. I could have you arrested this very moment for admission of your culpability in the matter—yes, even you, Inspector General of the Russian Navy. Your mandate extends only so far, particularly now in time of imminent war. There are operations underway that you are not privy to, and you have interfered, rather violently, with a man who was operating under my direct orders.”

“That I have.” Kapustin raised his chin, ready for battle. “And I must tell you that I am here to interfere further, unless I receive a full explanation of this situation. What you say is true, Admiral. My mandate is limited, but I have friends, even as you do, and some of them are in positions of considerable power.”

“Let me repeat—” Volsky began, but Kapustin cut him off.

“Yes, Yes, you are going to pretend this is all very top secret. I was inclined to believe your Captain when he used that line before. So I took the matter to someone who is privileged to know of these secret things, and I have yet another letter for you, Admiral.” He reached into his pocket and handed Volsky another plain folded paper.

Volsky took it with some reluctance, wondering what was there. Could Kapustin have pushed this all the way to Moscow? Could he have rallied Suchkov to his side, or even the President or Prime Minister? Was he handing me orders from Moscow? He opened the paper and read the thin handwritten note silently.

“Admiral Volsky, I ask you to please enlighten Inspector General Kapustin as to the nature of your recent operations aboard the battlecruiser Kirov and the importance of the current operation now underway in the Caspian. You may find his cooperation essential.

- Pavel Kamenski, First Deputy Chairman, KGB, Ret.”

“I was to give you one thing more,” said Kapustin, producing a faded photograph and handing it to the Admiral.

Volsky took the photo, his brows raising with surprise when he saw it. It was immediately clear to him what had happened now. Kapustin kept digging and when he managed to get hold of Fedorov’s letter he decided the mystery was now beginning to touch upon dangerous information, hidden secrets, black operations, shadows he was not accustomed to lighting with the flashlight of his diligent mind and work. Volsky knew the man was close to Kamenski, and it was no surprise that he went to him with this. Apparently Kamenski knew more about *Kirov* that anyone realized. The Admiral stared at the photograph, breathing deeply.

“Kamenski gave you this?”

“He did.”

“And did he tell you where he found this photo?”

“Oh, I asked him, but he would not reveal those details. It was enough for him to assure me as to its authenticity, and I can tell you that was more than enough for me to grasp at that moment. I must say that I found it hard to believe, and so Kamenski advised me to have this discussion with you, before things get out of hand, as he put it, and put the matter to rest.”

“Things were already getting out of hand,” said Volsky, with just a touch of anger. “I will assume your Captain Volkov was responsible for delivering Fedorov’s note to you in the first place.” He leaned forward, leveling a finger at Kapustin. “If you think you can rely on men like that from Naval Intelligence to do your dirty work, Kapustin, I will tell you that I have men of my own to command, men of war. I will not hesitate to use the full power and authority of my position to see that my operations are not compromised in any way.”

“Admiral Volsky…” Kapustin held out a hand, placating the Admiral. “I am not here to quarrel with you, and for the methods I used to obtain that letter, I apologize to you here and now. It will not happen again. As for Captain Volkov, yes, he can be difficult to manage at times. Kamenski and I have sent him off on a wild goose chase to keep him busy. He is riding the

Trans-Siberian rail line, checking every depot from here to the Caspian Sea, and will be of no further bother to you. But Admiral—that photograph—imagine my shock and surprise! I am a man accustomed to keeping my feet firmly on the ground. Numbers, reports, photographs—yes, I have piles and piles of them. But when I saw that one, my entire world turned upside down, and I must tell you that I was given the choice of either believing what my eyes were telling me or considering myself insane. Can you help me answer that question?"

"What else has Kamenski told you?"

"Wasn't that enough? Please, Admiral—is that photo authentic, or am I a lunatic?"

Volsky thought for a good long time, watching Kapustin and wondering what else he might already know. Pavel Kamenski had been one of the most powerful operatives of the KGB in the decades leading up to the demise of the old Soviet Union. He survived the dissolution of that organization and was instrumental in seeing its services parceled off to other agencies like the Federal Protective Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service and the GRU. Volsky had long wondered what the Soviet and the Russian governments after it had learned about *Kirov*. After all, they had nearly eighty years to ruminate on information they may have uncovered as a result of *Kirov's* astounding sorties to the 1940s.

He looked at Kapustin, considering, then nodded. "Very well, Inspector. I will tell you about this photograph, if you care to listen, and then you will be kind enough to answer a few questions for me."

"Deal," said Kapustin, sitting up in his chair, obviously interested.

Volsky leaned forward, placing the photograph on his desk and tapping it with his finger. "If you must know, then I will consider enlightening you, Inspector—on one condition."

"Name it."

"I want to meet with Kamenski."

The Inspector General smiled. "Admiral, I would be more than happy to make the introduction."

"Very well, I hope your breakfast has settled, Inspector." Volsky leaned back, thinking. "On the night of July 28th this summer past *Kirov* was on station with the attack submarine *Orel* north of Yan Mayen for live fire exercises…"

Chapter 9

Fedorov stood there gaping at the scene, disoriented and trying to determine what had happened. His instinct told him to get outside, for the commotion seemed to be drawing everyone out of the nearby buildings, and he could hear shouts and see people pointing at something just outside the dining hall. He holstered his pistol and ran to join them, amazed at the brightness in the sky to the northeast. When he finally got clear of the eaves overhanging the dining hall doorway he saw it, an enormous glow in the sky, as if a massive fire was burning on the distant tree-sewn taiga. The whole northeastern sky was involved and the only thing that came to mind to explain it was the awful memory of that nuclear detonation he had seen aboard *Kirov* in the North Atlantic, yet this was bigger, more awesome, a fiery glow on the horizon that spoke of terrible disaster.

He saw three men pointing at the sky, shaking their heads in disbelief, and went over to join them, listening to what they were saying. One man, short, stocky, with dark hair and a thin mustache was speaking to a tall, swarthy man. “What could it be?” he said. “A fire in the sky? How is it possible?”

The third man listened intently, turning his head from one to the other like a child waiting to be told something as his parents talked. Fedorov could see that he was not dressed like any of the others, and when the tall man turned to him and spoke in English, he realized he was not Russian. The man returned with passable Russian, but it was clear that he was not a native speaker.

An Englishman! What would he be doing here in the middle of the Soviet Union in 1942? Fedorov studied the man closely. He realized that Britain and Russia were supposed allies, but the man was obviously a civilian and to find him here in a distant rail yard in Siberia was very odd.

“Excuse me,” said Fedorov, “what has happened?” It was the question on everyone’s lips, and the stocky young man who had been speaking turned to him, looking at him strangely. Fedorov had taken off his heavier outer coat with his NKVD decorations while he slept. His Black Ushanka was also upstairs on the night stand by his bed, but he still wore the lighter service jacket Troyak had given him, jet black with two broad pockets over each breast. The Black Tiger patch of the Spetsnaz insignia below each shoulder on the arms seemed to draw the man’s interest, and his eye drifted to the

pistol in Fedorov's side holster.

"Military?" The young man asked, and Fedorov realized he needed to say something to preserve his cover.

"A long way from Vladivostok," he smiled. "I'm transferring to the Caspian."

Even as he spoke Fedorov began to wonder where Troyak and Zykov were, and why he had not seen these three men earlier when they arrived at the hotel. He reasoned that they may have come in on a train while they were sleeping. But where was the Sergeant? He found himself looking around to see if he could spot Troyak, but it only increased his confusion. Nothing looked familiar here! They had walked two blocks from the rail yard to the hotel, past a number of old weathered houses and storage buildings, but there was nothing between the hotel and the rail station now, just a vacant muddy field with tufts of grass fading away into the gravel bed of the rail yard. The train station itself seemed much too small. Ilanskiy had a marshalling yard with six lines, but now there were only two, and it was completely empty! There was no sign of his freight train, the rail workers, or anyone else. What was going on here?

"Something terrible has happened," said the stocky young man. "But there doesn't seem to be any immediate danger. Let's get back inside." He tramped off, the tall man and Englishman in his wake, both chattering about the event. Fedorov followed them.

Back in the hotel dining room he saw the men seating themselves at the table setting he noted earlier, and when the younger man saw him he beckoned him to join, gesturing to an empty chair.

"Tell me you are not a security man working for the Okhrana and I will be happy to share my breakfast table with you," said the young man as Fedorov drew near.

Fedorov was confused, still looking around and finding the dining room strangely unfamiliar. Where was Troyak? What was happening on the taiga outside? He should be out looking for Zykov and the Sergeant. Yet there was something about this energetic young man that compelled him to linger for a moment, his confused thoughts settling like well stirred tea leaves at the bottom of his tea cup mind.

"Then again if you *are* Okhrana, I must tell you I have done nothing inappropriate. I was given a full release, and I mean only to travel to Irkutsk to visit friends. You need have no further worries about me." The man looked

at him, waiting. “Well? Which is it?”

The Okhrana? That was the old secret service of the Tsar before the Russian revolution! What was this man talking about? Yet it was obvious to him that the man needed some reassurance, and so Fedorov held up a hand, “have no fear,” he said. “I have no business with you. I’m just a soldier.”

“Good then,” the young man held out a hand. “Mironov.”

“Fedorov.” The two men shook hands.

“These other two are my table guests as well,” said Mironov. “This is an Englishman, here to report for his newspaper in London. A worthy occupation, journalism. I have a mind to take it up myself one day, though I do not think the Tsar’s government would appreciate much of what I would have to say.” He studied Fedorov closely after that remark, as if looking for some sign of resentment, still testing this newcomer to see if he might be a threat. Apparently he was satisfied when Fedorov just gave him a blank stare, still completely confused as to what was happening.

“And this is Boris Yevchenko, his guide. We’ll all share our breakfast!” He reached out and handed Fedorov of a piece of thick black rye.

Fedorov hesitated, still looking around for any sign of his comrades. He knew he could not sit here chatting over breakfast with these men until he re-established contact.

“I’m afraid I must first find my friends,” he said.

“Friends? Good! Bring them. We’ll all eat together.”

“You are too kind…” Fedorov nodded, excusing himself. “They must have gone out the main entrance. I’ll see if the serving girl has seen them.”

“Serving girl?” Mironov raised an eyebrow, but said nothing more as Fedorov nodded again and started for the front desk. He slipped through the arched door and saw the same counter there, only it seemed newer, in much better condition. A man came huffing in from the main entrance with three others in his wake.

“Just a moment, just a moment. With all this commotion out there a man cannot think straight!”

He was certainly correct in that, thought Fedorov, suddenly struck with a moment of recognition. He knew this man…he had seen him before. No, not in the real world, but in the painting that hung behind the front desk counter —the portrait of an elderly man—Ilyana’s grandfather! It was the same man, only this time there *was* no painting on the wall, and in its place was the living and breathing replica of the man he had seen in the portrait! Fedorov

stared at him as though he were seeing a ghost. What was happening here?

"Könnte es ein Vulkan sein?" said one of the men by the door.

"In Sibirien? Ein Vulkan?"

"Haben Sie auf dem Auto überprüft? Wenn Protos beschädigt wurde dann könnten wir einen weiteren tag mit reparaturen zu verlieren."

The other three men who had been following the proprietor were speaking in another language, which he now recognized as German. One wore a close fitting bonnet that covered his head and ears, leaving only his beady black eyes above a ruddy cheeked face, with long thin handlebar mustache. The other two had eye goggles strapped above the bills of woolen caps, and double breasted overcoats with brass buttons.

Fedorov knew a little German. The men had said something about a volcano and now they were talking about having to repair a car. His bewilderment redoubled, and then he looked at the wall behind the front desk counter where the portrait should have been—the portrait now huffing about behind the counter in flesh and blood, and he saw something that stunned him. The calendar there read June, 1908!

He stepped back, a startled expression on his face, and the old gray haired man behind the counter finally noticed him, giving him a strange look as though he was trying to place the man. Fedorov backed away from the scene, his mind a dizzy whirlwind of confusion. He suddenly remembered the microphone in the collar of his service jacket and, as he backed into the dining hall again by the hearth he pinched the toggle and spoke quietly, desperately.

"Troyak? Zykov? Can you read me?"

Silence.

Fedorov gave the back staircase a wide eyed look. He had been warned about those stairs by Ilyana, but now his only thought was to get back up to the second floor and into his room. He wanted to see if his hat and overcoat and equipment were still there—if his sanity could be found among those effects—and he slowly backed into the shadow of the stairwell, eyes wide with amazement. He saw the young man, Mironov, staring at him from across the room, a look of suspicion on his face now. Then there came another distant rumble of what sounded like thunder.

Fedorov turned and quickly began to climb the stairs. It was just a short flight of twelve steps, but it seemed endless, his legs leaden, and by the time he reached the last step he felt exhausted, breathing heavily with both fear

and exertion. He doubled over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. At that moment he heard the clomp of hard soled boots on the wooden floor and he straightened up to see a man walking briskly down the hall with an automatic weapon.

It was Troyak.

"There you are! Where have you been, Colonel?"

Fedorov just stared at him, still disoriented, so tired, a lethargy on him that he could not explain. "I think I need to sit down…"

Troyak could see his distress and helped him down the hall and into their room. Along the way he signaled Zykov, and told the Corporal to join them in their quarters. Fedorov had some water and rested on the bed briefly, with Troyak watching him closely, a serious expression on his face.

"Are you ill, Colonel Fedorov?"

"No… No…Something happened, Troyak. I can't explain it."

"We searched the entire building. Where did you go?"

Fedorov blinked, trying to compose himself. "Down the back stairs. I thought I heard something—that rumbling sound—so I went down the stairs."

Then, for the first time, Fedorov noticed it was pitch black outside. The room was lit by a single oil lamp, but otherwise all was dark.

"Downstairs? You were gone for over an hour, sir. It is getting on to midnight and the train will be leaving in half an hour."

"The train?" Fedorov still seemed confused. What had just happened to him? Was he dreaming? Sleep walking? "I must have been dreaming," he said slowly. "Yes…it must have been a dream."

There were footsteps in the hall, and Troyak was up, weapon ready. They heard muffled voices. Then a man speaking in a louder voice. "I've done nothing. Let me go!"

Troyak opened the door and saw Zykov with one hand on the collar of a short young man and the other with a pistol to his head. The Corporal smiled. "Look what I found in the hall."

"Let me go, I say. I have done nothing!"

Zykov pushed the young man into the room and stepped in behind him. Fedorov looked up, astounded again. It was Mironov!

"So you are with the Okhrana after all," said Mironov sullenly as soon as he saw Fedorov there. "I knew there was something odd about you. What have I done? You have no right to detain me!"

Fedorov's brain finally began to function again, with images of all he had seen and experienced in the last few minutes slowly connecting. The sound of the explosion, the rumble of thunder, the distant glow on the horizon—the month and year on that calendar!

"Listen to me, Mironov," he began. "What is the date?"

"The date?"

"What is the month and year?"

Now Troyak had a bemused expression on his face, glancing at Zykov as if to communicate something unspoken to him. They were both looking at Fedorov as though he were ill. Then Mironov spoke, still somewhat indignant.

"So you mean to interrogate me, is that it?"

"No, no, please. Simply tell me the date."

"The 30th of June. I arrived late last night. You think I'm a dim witted fool, eh? I knew you were Okhrana the moment I set eyes on you. And when you refused to sit at my table my suspicions redoubled. But you have no reason to bother me. I have done nothing! What? Do you mean to hold that innocent remark I made about journalism against me? Yes, the government may not like what I have to say—but I have said nothing, nothing at all!" His eyes were fiery as he spoke, indignant, combative.

Fedorov tried to calm himself, but his pulse quickened when he heard what Mironov said. June 30. Impossible! Yet one by one the clues piled up in his weary brain, and then came tumbling down in an avalanche of sudden realization. June 30, 1908, the sound of thunder, the fire in the sky.

"My god, my god what has happened?" he breathed. "Mironov…You came up the back stairs just now?"

"I saw you go that way, and yes, I followed you to see what I could find out about you. It seems I have learned too much, eh? But that is no reason to arrest me again. A man has the right to see to his own safety, particularly after what just happened out there." He turned and pointed, suddenly noticing the darkness, the silence, the quiet night outside the window lit by a silvery gibbous moon. Now it was Mironov's turn to stare dumfounded at the window.

"What's happening here? Where's the day gone?"

"What is your full name, Mironov, your given name?"

The young man turned back to Fedorov, folding his arms on his barrel chest, defiant. "Sergie Mironov. You know only too well who I am if you are

Okhrana. What of it? What trumped up charge are you going to fabricate this time? Are you going to say you found a printing press? I had nothing to do with that, nothing whatsoever." His indignation was apparent.

"You mean Mironov*ich*, yes?"

The dark haired man said nothing now, his lips tight beneath the thin moustache, eyes alight.

"Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov?" Fedorov pressed him. "You were recently released from prison?"

"So you know me. You have been following me all along. I thought you might be shadowing the British reporter. That would be very much like your sort. I warned him, you know. I told him a foreigner will draw nothing but unwanted attention in this country now. The Tsar's oppression is despicable. There! I have said something—finally *said* something. Now you can arrest me and throw me back in prison if you wish. You were going to do that in any case." He folded his arms again, resigned.

Troyak was looking from one man to another, clearly confused. Fedorov seemed to know this man, at least he knew his name easily enough. But what was all this talk of the Okhrana and June of 1908?

There came a rumbling sound again, as though from far away, just as before. They all turned to look at the still open doorway. Fedorov sat up, his energy returned, his mind finally clear again. There was a stiff urgency to his movements, particularly when they heard the sound again, saw the amber glow in the outer hall.

"My god…" He stood up, the other men looking at him as though he had lost his mind. But Fedorov had heard more than enough. He cleared his throat, speaking firmly.

"Listen to me, Mironov. You must go back down stairs at once! Go by the same way you came—this instant! Do not worry. I have told you we have nothing to do with the Okhrana. We are merely soldiers on the long road west. That is all."

He gestured to Mironov, beckoning him to come with him, and when Troyak stood up he said, "Don't worry Sergeant, I'll handle this."

"You mean I am free to go?"

"Yes, just follow me." Fedorov reassured him.

Mironov looked at Troyak and Zykov, frowning, then followed Fedorov out the door. Troyak was up behind him, keeping a close eye on the young man. Fedorov was waiting on the upper landing of the back stairway.

“This way, Mironov. Quickly!”

There came a rumble of thunder again. Mironov was at Fedorov’s side. Looking him in the eye as though he were staring into the face of fate itself.

“You must go by the way you came, and quickly now, while you see that light.” Fedorov gestured to the amber glow from below. “And Mironov—never come up this stairway again. Understand? Get as far away from here as you can.”

Fedorov had an anguished look on his face, as if he had something more he needed to say, a tormented expression that held Mironov fixated for a time, their eyes and souls locked together in some bizarre twist of time and fate.

I must not say another word, thought Fedorov. But then a thought came to him like a thunderclap! What if *this* was the moment—the vital single moment that could change everything? What if Orlov’s leap from that helicopter was meant for one thing only—to bring Fedorov after him, and here to this very place, face to face with this defiant young man, Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov. He reached out as Mironov turned to go down the stairs, taking hold of the man’s arm to delay him.

Then Fedorov leaned forward, close to the young man’s ear and whispered something, his eyes vast and serious, his face like that of a man who was seeing a phantom from another world. He finished, then released Mironov’s arm.

“Go with god,” he said quietly. “Go and live, Mironov. *Live!*”

A light of uncertainty and bewilderment danced in Mironov’s eyes, then the urgency of the moment compelled him to move, and he stepped quickly down the narrow stairs.

“Zykov!” Fedorov gestured. “Wait here. But do not go down these steps under any circumstances. Understood?” Then he was off at a run, down the hall to the main stairway and, seeing him go, Troyak followed quickly behind. They rushed down the main stairs, rounding the corner and emerging in the front reception area, lit by a single bare bulb on the ceiling above which guttered off and on. To his great relief Fedorov saw the portrait of the old man, Ilyana’s grandfather, hanging on the wall. He rushed past the desk and into the dining hall, finding the room dark and silent, the embers of the fire low on the hearth and Ilyana sitting there on a low stool, her robe pulled tight against the midnight chill. Her eyes met Fedorov’s, then drifted fearfully to the shadowed alcove that led to the back stairway. The thin high call of a

train whistle sounded from the distant rail yard, stark and cold against the night.

“Did a man just come down these stairs?” he asked in a low voice, a knowing look in his eye.

The woman looked at the alcove leading to the back stairway, eyes wide and tinged by the last light of the embers. She slowly shook her head in the negative as Troyak came up behind him, looking at him with obvious concern on his face. Fedorov turned, his breath finally stilled.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Have Zykov bring the equipment, Sergeant. But tell him to use the main stairway—*not* the back stairs—understood? We had better get to the rail yard or we’ll miss our train.”

Troyak gave the order through his jacket comm-link system as they walked across the dining hall to leave. Fedorov gave one last look over his shoulder and met Ilyana’s eyes.

He smiled.

Part IV

Contracts

“Murphy's Tenth Law:
Mother Nature is a bitch.

Murphy's Eleventh Law:
It is impossible to make anything foolproof,
because fools are so very ingenious.

Murphy's Twelfth Law:
Things get worse under pressure.”

— Murphy’s Laws

Chapter 10

Ben Flack peered through the Plexiglas, and didn't like what he was seeing. Dawn was breaking in the Caspian Region, and it was not to be a quiet day. Off in the distance, obscured by the morning haze over the water, it was clear that a whole lot of trouble was heading his way. He had been on the phone for the last hour, first with Wade Hanson of Crowley & Company, yammering that one of their three *Invader* class tugs, the *Galveston*, had been boarded while operating inshore. The other two beat a hasty retreat for the deeper waters and the open sea, narrowly evading the Kazakh militias. Thank god the *American Salvor* class boat got out safely after the rig was finally set and in place on the silted bottom five kilometers off the coast. But *Galveston* was officially his problem now, on top of fifteen other problems that would stretch from here all the way back to Bollinger Canyon in sunny California.

The Chevron brass there did not like the news this morning either, and they let him know about it in no uncertain terms. He had been on the phone with some middle tier pencil pusher turned weather man. *"The whole Gulf is shut down for Hurricane Victor, Flack,"* the man had lectured him.

"This damn thing made direct hit on Houston. All the refineries are off line, you understand? We lost Conoco Phillips, Valero, Exxon/Mobil, Deer Park, Premcor, Marathon Ashland—the works. BP lost *Thunder Horse* and *Mad Dog* is off line too. Now we've got to make sure production stays up out there, right? We need crude in tankers heading our way, and soon. You need to clean that mess up there and get flows back up to speed ASAP. Bunker as much oil as you can in Baku for a credit on the other end of the Supsa line, got that? We're looking for any loose tanker traffic we can get our hands on. I expect we'll have something for you soon—negotiating with some conveyance carriers now. You just get on top of this business and see to things. You completed that rig set last night, right? "

Yes he had finished the set, and yes things looked manageable, but no he didn't think there was adequate security in the region, and yes it really did seem like this latest flare-up was going to be worse than the last, and no he didn't know where his numbers would be just yet, but yes he's have readings as soon as he heard from the pump stations on the coast and yes they had enough in the line to start bunkering at Baku if a carrier could be found in the

Black Sea, but no he couldn't guarantee the flow pressure just yet, and on and on it went.

So Galveston Island got slammed. The thin barrier island near Houston was now under water. Ironically, he had his own little *Galveston* here to worry about. How was he going to get that damnable tug back? If the raiders parted that sucker out to the Chinese, the insurance tab would be charged to his operation. Was the crew safe? Real violence against Western oil men had been rare in the region but, after that ominous news feed the rebels put out the night before, all bets were off. He would no doubt have to bargain for the crew's release, and he wasn't sure he had much to bet in that game.

As for local threats, all he had at the moment was the Rig Boss and his side arm. He squinted through his binoculars, not liking the sight of those damnable fast lighters the rebels had out near the coastline. Where was KAZPOL? What the fuck were they doing? Probably running all over the region trying to tamp down one little incident after another. The pink dawn was starting to silhouette some of the inshore facilities. There was an unwelcome plume of smoke riding up on the hazy morning air.

He stared at the FAX he had received from San Ramon. They were already papering over the news with an official statement being readied for the press. *"We are working with all appropriate government agencies and community leaders to try and restore peace and stability in the area and will resume normal business... etc., etc."*

Fat chance of this getting air time in any case, not with the aftermath coverage for hurricane Victor at Houston this morning. Chevron had weathered far worse storms than this one but press had not been rosy in recent months. That was the least of his worries. What was he going to do about the *Galveston*, and what were those damn swift boats up to yonder?

His mind invariably went to Timmermann and his merc detachment. Where the hell were they? He'd put in the emergency call five hours ago. Company helo has been out for hours, but no mercs. How was he supposed to fend off the locals with the Rig Boss and his sidearm? How was he supposed to find the *Galveston*, let alone her crew? And what was this new shit about tanker traffic being routed into the Black Sea? That place could become a lake of fire any day. Did they think he was about to start moving significant amounts of crude under these conditions? He'd need security, damn it, and lots of it. Then he'd be lucky if he had any line pressure left to even get flow started on the pipeline to Baku.

Second quarter output for Chevron had slipped to the lowest level since 2018. Q3 was equally depressed. Flack had news for the Bollinger Boyz—it wasn't going to get any better, and Chevron was not the only company hurting right now. It was going to get worse, and it was going to get mean, particularly if the Russians sent that Motor Rifle Division across the border up north.

"Mudman!" Flack yelled so he would be heard over the constant music flow into his technician's head.

"What's up, Flackie?"

"That shit out east looks bad. I think we may be getting some uninvited visitors soon. Where's the damn helo?"

"HellifIknow," Mudman ran the words together as he chewed on another granola bar. "Nuthin' on radio for hours." He was distracted by the small TV set where he was watching the local news feed out of Fort Shevchenko.

"Well we're missing a goddamned tug!" Flack ran a hand through his thinning hair. The sweat on his brow a fine sheen.

Mudman looked at him, his jaw slack. He was pointing at his TV monitor, waving Flack over. "Think I found it," he said with a solemn tone.

Flack was at his side, his eyes rolling with disgust the instant he saw the image on the screen. It was the *Galveston*, surrounded by lighters full of gunmen, and her blindfolded crew all lined up on the foredeck.

"What a load of crap," Flack swore.

"Shot her up pretty bad," said Mudman. There was obvious damage to all the wind screens and siding on the tug. Someone just let loose with a Kalashnikov in the air, and the scene became a jubilant little hostage fest. "And look, isn't that a Caverton Helo?" The Caverton Offshore Support Group had a small fleet of helos providing shore to sea lift services to any number of commercial interests in the region.

Flack squinted at the screen. "Yeah, that's Caverton, alright."

"Well, shit!" Mudman pointed at the screen. "Looks like they've got a full scale evacuation going on." The scene shifted in a jerky motion. The camera man was running. There was an explosion and the Caverton helo careened onto the tarmac, its main rotor spinning wildly out of control, the craft engulfed in flame.

"Christ almighty…" Mudman just stared. "…everything living and unliving…And every other unthinkable vice…" He repeated the threat he had made light of earlier in the rebel press release, suddenly realizing they just

may mean what they said this time.

"Gonna need Timmermann," said Flack. "Where's the damn mercs? Where's KAZPOL?" He had a real case of the blues this morning, and the long day had just begun.

* * *

Flack wasn't the only man thinking about the oil in the Caspian Sea. That same day Alberto Salase spent a good long time on the phone speaking to the same "pencil pushers" at Bollinger Canyon that Flack always complained about. That evening he boarded a helicopter for a very special trip out to Larnaca Bay. Salase was a business broker out of Alexandria, with a well developed local network in the region. Now he was fortunate to be welcomed aboard the *Argos Fire,* the floating corporate headquarters of Fairchild & Company, for a privileged visit with a potential new client.

And a privilege it was, thought Captain Gordon MacRae as he ushered the portly black man into the dining room. Elena Fairchild was not one to allow such a face to face meeting, at least so early into a business relationship. The normal protocols would have seen Salase jumping one middle manager after another, and then proving himself before being admitted to the inner circle of the Fairchild executive offices.

But the rapidly evolving oil situation was shaking up all the old protocols. The rising global tensions had swept away longstanding plans by any number of major producers courting operations in Central Asia. The Russians had shown them just how easy it was to put their thumb on the jugular, cutting the pipelines they had vainly tried to build to outflank Russian soil, and Russian interests in the region. And when the oil didn't flow, the money stopped flowing as well.

Fairchild was a realist at heart, he knew. The company had relied on Persian Gulf contracts for the last several years, but now she wanted out. Eliminating the Suez bottleneck or a long trip around the Cape of Good Hope offered considerable savings in both operational costs and peace of mind. Now she was keen to leave the dangers of the Gulf behind make new inroads in the turbulent Central Asian superfields. The terminal Port of Ceyhan was an east port of call in well protected waters, and the transit from there to ports in Europe or the US were much more secure—until the BTC line blew up.

A boson's mate smartly piped the Captain's entry to the dining hall and

announced Alberto Salase as the guest of honor. Elena Fairchild was already seated at the executive table, and she rose to greet the two men as they approached, dressed smartly in a form fitting pants suit, pale grays, with a plain white blouse flaring open at the neck, accessorized by a burgundy scarf. Her dress was smart, yet more functional than anything else, the clothing loose fitting so she could breath in the humid Mediterranean climate.

She was a middle aged woman in her late forties, though her tall, athletic figure had held on very nicely through the years, and she still had a youthful aspect, in spite of a fleck of gray that she bravely allowed in her dark hair, when most women would have rinsed it away years ago. She could have been a marathon runner if she had had a mind for the sport—certainly had the legs for it, though her pants suit gave her a prim and almost androgynous appearance. And she was not one for the ornaments of jewelry, allowing herself a pair of white pearl earrings and a silver Claddagh ring on one hand.

The simplicity of the ring suited her well—the circular bands ending with two hands clasping a heart, and a crown above. It was not a wedding band, in the traditional sense, for she had never married, though it could be used to signal a person's romantic availability, or lack thereof, depending on which hand it was sported, and on which direction the hands and heart were faced.

MacRae often thought the crown above that heart was a fine symbol of the loyalty she had for England. Fairchild had served British interests, making a small but vital contribution to the UK's energy position, for over twenty years. He had signed on as Fleet Captain nine years ago, earning the trust and confidence of his CEO with diligence and due respect. The *Argos Fire* was a nice little reward, a ship that any other captain in the world would be proud to sail. His relationship with 'Madame,' as he often called her in formal situations, had been cordial, professional, and strictly business, though he had to admit a growing attraction for the woman had developed in him over the years. He admired her resolve, the constancy of her temperament, the tight control she had on her emotions in the boardroom—a woman to be reckoned with where cutting a deal required a fine edge.

But yet there was a definitely a woman behind the corporate mask she so carefully maintained, and he had become fascinated with the quiet solitude that surrounded her, pleased that he had been drawn even closer to the inner core of company operations over the years. He had to admit that the occasion of finding himself alone with her, now a close confederate and even a confidant in many ways, had meant a lot to him. With no Mr. Fairchild he

even entertained a fleeting notion that he might become involved with her one day, though he had never expressed anything of the sort, or pushed that agenda in even the subtlest of ways.

He was about to make the introductions but, true to form, Fairchild took the matter in hand.

“Mr. Salase, how good of you to join us,” the Fairchild smile radiated her steely beauty, her dark eyes carrying genuine warmth, but an intensity that was very penetrating. Her hand seemed smallish when engulfed in Salase’s substantial palm. She wondered how much money had greased it over the years in bribes, kickbacks and other “compensation” for his valued services as a deal broker.

“My pleasure, as always, Miss Fairchild. You do me great honor.”

“Captain,” Elena smiled and nodded in MacRae’s direction, and they were seated with little more fanfare.

“I hope you had a smooth ride over,” Elena carried the conversation forward.

“Very pleasant,” Salase returned. “Good weather. Clear skies and open seas. Perhaps a good omen, eh? Not so good up north, but that is good weather for business.”

Elena smiled, for Salase was conveying more with his words than it seemed. Of course there had been a round of negotiations on lower levels before this meeting was ever scheduled. Salase clearly felt matters were now favorable for a close, she thought. She certainly could use a new angle right now. Fairchild & Company had been angling for additional business in Central Asia for some time. Salase was well connected, with a good intelligence network to boot. With tensions rising virtually everywhere, her need to close a deal had taken a sudden, urgent turn.

Rumors of a possible big haul prompted her to gather all her spare tankers here in the Med. Her intelligence was very good when it came to fingering the pulse in the pipelines, but one thing she did not know that night was going to change everything and upset her carefully hatched plans. Captain MacRae had a piece of it in his pocket in a recent SIGINT decrypt, and Salase, fat evasive Mister Salase, had the rest in the palm of his greasy, greasy hand.

She could sense it…feel it. Something was wrong, and an inner sense of warning told her it had something to do with that damnable telephone call that had come on the top secret red phone a month ago, and changed her life

forever.

Damn you, Salase, she thought. What do you know that I don't know? Heads are going to fry on this ship if I get another big surprise tonight…Fry in hot, hot oil.

Chapter 11

Yes…that damnable phone call. The red phone. The phone in the secret room hidden behind a movable bulkhead at the back of her office. It still haunted her, particularly after the remarkable return of the new Russian fleet flagship *Kirov*, which had recently been involved in a strange accident in the Norwegian Sea, vanishing and presumed sunk until the ship suddenly reappeared in the Pacific a month later, sailing into Vladivostok's Golden Horn Bay.

Elena Fairchild knew far more than she wanted to know about that ship, and its disappearance and return sent chills down her spine. She had received a phone call about it on a very special line. The nondescript red phone sat encased in a clear unbreakable Plastifibre dome on a table in her hidden inner office. A little over a month ago a signal had gone out from Royal Navy headquarters to secret outposts and at-sea locations all over the world. *Argos Fire* was one such location, and when Elena first felt the subtle vibration from her cell phone, reaching into a jacket pocket to see what the call was about, her heart skipped a beat. The screen was alight with two simple characters "G-1."

She immediately withdrew to the private office and stood there, staring at the Plastifibre dome with a mix of shock and fear in her mind. Reaching slowly, she placed her right thumb on the scanner, then keyed a code on the touchpad. The vacuum sealed chamber opened with a hiss, and the Plastifibre dome slowly slid back.

God, she thought, let it be a test. She would thumb the receive button on the phone and it would read TEST – TEST – TEST, that was all. It had to be a test. It *must* be a test, for the thought that the entire world she was living in now, everything, all of it, every book, manuscript, song, poem, video…every street, town and city…every human being alive might now be different, subtly changed, was a staggering fear. And some might simply be gone, erased, and completely forgotten, as though they had never even lived. It *had* to be a test, but when she pressed her quivering thumb to the receive button three words lit up the screen and changed everything: *Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo…*

With a rising surge of adrenaline she simply closed her eyes, as if afraid

of what she might find different or missing when she opened them, and quietly mourned the loss of the life and world she had been living in before that moment. Her hand was shaking when she reached and pressed the second button to confirm secure reception of the message. It was the signal she had waited for, with dread and foreboding, all her life.

It had finally happened, and the saddest thing about it was that only twelve people on the planet knew about it—the twelve senior apostles of the Watch. There were legions in the rank and file these twelve might call to the task they served, but only these twelve knew the whole and complete truth, the real meaning of the three words that had just flashed on her telescreen—and Elena Fairchild was one of them. It was many weeks of quiet inner mourning before she could look outside and accept the world as it was. And many nights she would lie awake and wonder what was missing, lost, changed.

She consoled herself by reading Shakespeare, listening to Mozart and reveling in her art books from the great masters, all untouchable, all as they were, for nothing that happened prior to the year 1941 could be altered. “Ignorance is the curse of God,” wrote Shakespeare. “Knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.” Yet the knowledge she had now was like a bite of that apple in Eden, a forbidden fruit that only twelve men and women on earth had tasted. The world had most certainly changed, yet no one knew how. They were oblivious, accepting the world they lived in as one unalterable reality. But they were wrong.

When *Kirov* was suddenly reported at sea in the Pacific a month later and apparently bound for Vladivostok, her pulse ran on again. She suddenly realized that there were *more* than twelve people on earth that knew the whole truth…many more, and they were on that very ship! Shakespeare whispered in her inner ear: “Hell is empty, and all devils are here.”

Now, a little over a month later, things were all getting very strange on the geopolitical chessboard and Elena Fairchild was a bit edgy about it all. The Chinese engagement with the Japanese over the disputed Senkaku Islands had led to an alarming escalation in the Pacific. The sudden sharp conflict at sea had ended with a barrage of six ballistic missiles at Naha airfield on the Japanese island of Okinawa. Since then a grim silence had fallen over the scene, but Fairchild knew things were not so simply resolved in this volatile region. Elsewhere in the world tensions were rising to the near boiling point in many other traditional flashpoints. Her latest Intel was quite

disturbing.

Russia, now firmly in the newly formed SinoPac alliance, had maneuvered to influence oil and gas operations in Central Asia as its first priority. When the US pushed for a planned new pipeline through Azerbaijan, shipping arms to Georgia in exchange for pipeline easements, the scale of the Russian response was quite telling. Russian intelligence was still potent, and the 58th Army had been put on alert, ordered to move rapidly with elements of the 20th Guards, and 19th and 42nd Motor Rifle Divisions. These forces were joined by units of the Russian 76th and 98th Airborne Divisions and the 45th Spetsnaz, a special operations reconnaissance regiment. Some of these forces, including a full Motor Rifle Division, were poised at the northern border of Kazakhstan.

The US had nothing in the region but a single ready brigade way off in Kuwait, and even that was merely the equipment for this brigade, and not the personnel. Now the Americans had come to regret their bumbling about in Afghanistan, a long twelve year presence that had left them with nothing but thin promises for basing rights that had evaporated three years after the last combat troops were pulled out. So when the Russians posed a real threat in the Caucasus what could the Western Alliance do?

Damn, thought Elena, Russia was back on the high seas, and the two great powers were back to their old games again, both flexing their muscles with “planned” military exercises and a lot of threatening press on both sides. The stakes could not be higher, particularly with China and Japan at each other’s throats and a big stink in the UN now that had escalated to threats against Taiwan. In this climate, Elena Fairchild, like any good mother, wanted all her children closer to home.

Of her five remaining tankers, one was home at Milford Haven getting ready for the next contracted haul. Three more were nearing Cyprus, due here tomorrow for a special mission—if all went as she hoped it would tonight. All her Persian Gulf contracts were tabled now, except the crown jewel of her fleet, the *Princess Royal*, her largest ship. The Ultra Large Crude Carrier was still in the Persian Gulf, laden with oil that would secure a good chunk of her financial situation for the foreseeable future.

She was thinking about picking up something new tonight, the icing on the cake *Princess Royal* carried, perhaps a quick relief run to American ports if Europe had any stores of gasoline they might release. There might be oil credits bunkered in Ceyhan that would lead to conveyance contracts, and she

expected this was what Salase was here to offer her. With empty tankers already at sea, she'd be three days ahead of the competition in any such venture. She could get to the oil first, and being first on the scene with ample resources, in war and in business, had some very real advantages.

The situation in the Persian Gulf also prompted her to immediately recall her last oil tanker there, the *Princess Royal* was all of 400,000 tons, the weight of four *Nimitz* class aircraft carriers, and capable of transporting three million barrels of oil in a single haul. The ship was now outward bound to the straits of Hormuz, pregnant with crude worth nearly half a billion dollars at current market prices, which were only likely to go higher. It was a bad time for any shenanigans in the Gulf. She had bank notes due on the *Argos Fire* refit at the end of the month. Credit was very tight on the world market, and she knew there would be no way the Bank of London would extend. She had to come up with a cool $700 million cash for *Argos Fire,* and more than half of it was riding in the belly of *Princess Royal.* She needed that last forty percent, and tonight she would set the *Argos Fire* on a quest for that golden fleece—oil.

Stupid to leave my big lady alone like that with *Argos* at home for replenishment, she thought to herself. Stupid not to take the Intel briefings seriously on the Gulf. Israel was again flying maneuvers over Lebanon. She wouldn't put it past the Israelis to strike out on their own against Iran at any time now. The whole damn show over Georgia was also as much about Iran as anything else, she knew. Iran and the oil. Damn, she thought, I should have had *Argos Fire* down through Suez weeks ago to keep watch on *Princess Royal.* Very stupid move on my part.

"So what is the situation up north, Mr. Salase?"

"A little bad weather," said Salase, smiling broadly, nose flaring. He was referring to the recent outbreak of violence in the North Caspian.

"Bit of a squall?" she probed innocuously.

"Perhaps something more."

Elena Fairchild, simply smiled at the ante, calling her guest at once. Salase glanced at the Captain, unaware of his status as a member of the company's inner circle, and not knowing if he was to be privy to the information he might now disclose.

"I assure you, we are all friends here," she said, settling the matter. Salase smiled, nodding to the Captain, who returned a polite smile as he folded his hands, listening attentively.

“In fact, let’s speak plainly, Mr. Salase,” said Fairchild, the light of the chase in her eyes. “What does the weather forecast have in it that I should be concerned about this evening?”

“Opportunity, perhaps,” said Salase. “Lots of trouble in the Region. Several factions are vying for power in Kazakhstan. A bit of the blood feud between them, but all set aside when there are so many Western interests to feed on. Not to mention the fact that the Russians are sitting on the northern border like a pack of wolves.”

“Indeed,” said Elena. “Enlighten me.”

Salase smiled. “Contracts,” he said quietly. “Unexpected windfall in the storm, eh?”

Fairchild leaned forward, her chin resting on her palm, elbow on the table, in contravention of all good etiquette. Business was business, and they were only just starting to receive hors d'oeuvres. The main course would come in time. Salase wanted to nibble a bit, probably to see what percentages he could ferret. She would hear him out. He lowered his voice, glancing at the departing table servant.

“We heard something of interest,” he said, his accent heavy, yet engaging. “A lot of trouble in the region, and trouble in the Gulf as well—both Gulfs. Big storm hit Houston, big trouble brewing in the straits of Hormuz as well.”

That last bit got the attention of both Fairchild and MacRae, though the doughty lady showed no emotion on her face. The Captain’s mind went to the decrypt in his pocket. He had not found time to inform Miss Fairchild of the potential threat in the Persian Gulf.

“I don’t ship anything to Houston, my good man,” said Fairchild.

“At the moment…But you *do* ship from the straits of Hormuz to terminals that serve the US. You have a ship there now, eh? Big ship in a bad place.”

She smiled, waiting for him to make more of a point. Her worries over *Princess Royal* were in no way evident on her face.

“Well this business up north in the Caspian now,” Salase danced off in another direction. “The hurricane has everything shut down for the Americans. Always trouble, only this year a very bad late season storm. The refineries shut down, rigs were damaged; shortages will soon follow, and prices will spike. Going to be a lot of demand for quick deliveries to offset that shortfall. Oil supplies in Europe are very weak right now.”

“I see,” Elena was pleasantly interested, still showing no undue concern. “You’re suggesting I divert my at sea shipments to American ports?”

“Perhaps. I can get a very good price for you—very good. You take *Princess Royal* home, what do you get? A hundred pounds on the barrel. The Crown is very consistent, yes? But by the time your shipment gets round the Cape of Good Hope you could get very much more in an American port. Very much.”

“No disagreement here, aside from the fact that Fairchild serves the interests of the Crown at the moment.”

“Ah…” Salase grinned, a little hesitation in his manner now. He reached for the glass of wine the waiter had just delivered, giving the moment a little air.

“The Crown has many interests,” he said. “Also many servants. Much can happen in troubled times.” He ate an olive, and a bit of cheese, dabbing his thick lips with the monogrammed table linen napkin.

“One should always remain open to the possibilities—particularly when financing is so very hard to come by. Yes?”

That last remark had hit a nerve, MacRae knew. He was hinting at the big payment coming due on the *Argos* refit at Bank of London. Fairchild didn’t like people nosing into her banking arrangements, but her features were as placid as the bay at Larnaca, where the sun was setting now and casting a lovely glow on the water.

“And what good fortune!” Salase smiled again. “You have lots of empty ships that need filling.”

“I didn’t know you were so privy to our shipping manifests.” It was clear that he knew a lot more than he was hinting at, the berthing status of her ships could be viewed on the Internet by any inquiring soul, but she wanted to give him a gentle nudge in the ribs just the same.

“Oh, pardon me,” he feigned an apology. “My nose is as big as my ears. I can’t help hearing things, and I’m always keen to smell out a new opportunity for profit, yes?”

“Well it’s very clear that you smell one here.” The tone of Elena’s voice shifted a few points to starboard. She was leaning into business now, the pleasantries over. “Do go on, Mr. Salase.”

“Well,” he said, also sounding a bit more serious now. “These tankers you have at sea…They left port three days ago, but nothing was mentioned of their destination. I couldn’t find them on any of my registry schedules for the big ports you service.”

“Imagine that,” Elena said flatly.

“Oh, I will imagine,” Salase came back quickly. “I’ll Imagine they might be close at hand, but when I looked for them on the flight in there was no sign. Just this beautiful vessel I am privileged to visit here now.” He waved his hand expansively. “Lots of empty tonnage out there somewhere,” he finished. “I may have a contract for you.”

MacRae glanced at Fairchild, and she at him, ever so briefly. Salase couldn’t see it, but it was clear to the Captain that his boss was interested.

“Well,” Elena began, “assuming these ships *were* close by, and assuming they were still empty, or had any chamber room available to take on more product, then what would we be talking about?” Elena was holding her cards close to her trim, yet ample chest, but still ready to draw.

“It’s all in the weather,” Salase beamed, then lowered his voice, eyes wandering with a casual, conspiratorial glance from the Captain to his Executive in Chief. “We picked up a communication from the American Chevron operation in the Caspian Region.” He was all business now. “They have more trouble than you’ll ever read about on the news wires. A call went out for mercenaries.”

“My, this *is* getting interesting,” Elena gave him her most engaging smile, and it had just the effect she intended. The excitement in his eyes was obvious as he continued, hoping he had a good chance of closing a lucrative deal tonight.

“More even,” he began. “We’ve received formal requests for any spare tanker capacity in the region. They want it as soon as possible. And here you have these ships close at hand. How fortunate.”

Fairchild looked at him, her eyes bright. “Yes, how very fortunate, Mr. Salase.”

Chapter 12

Who knows what is good or bad, thought Elena Fairchild. Yes she was fortunate to have all this spare conveyance in a very convenient spot that night because she knew all about Chevron's call for tanker support. It was, in part, the reason she had *Princess Marie* and *Princess Angelina* at sea, and the reason why *Princess Irene* was slipping through the Suez canal tomorrow night to join them, though Salase must have known at least that much. She also knew that her vessels represented 80% of any spare tanker capacity within 2000 miles at the moment. Her network had intercepted the Chevron radio phone call days ago, and it was clear that the move could net her a tidy contract here.

But the old Taoist proverb rankled at her…who knows what is good or bad? These ships represented the heart of her entire enterprise, and the oil centers of the world were getting very dangerous these days. Salase was up to something here, and so she decided to tease him a bit.

"We're nearly twelve hundred miles from the Caspian superfields, and the last time I looked there was no direct sea route."

"And of course you can't accept shipments from Ceyhan at the moment after that pipeline attack at Erzurum. They just shipped off everything they had bunkered there, and now it will be some time before any more oil gets through. Most unfortunate. That limits options. The situation is very dangerous now, but may I make an informed guess that this ship is a security vessel, and that you also have a security contingent aboard? Helicopters?"

"Mr. Salase, there's an American carrier battlegroup in the Atlantic and heading east to the Med even as we speak. Lots of helicopters, sailors, not to mention about a hundred lethal strike aircraft."

"Ah, yes, one of their presidential ships, if I am not mistaken." He addressed the remark to Captain MacRae, who nodded in the affirmative.

"CVN *Roosevelt*," MacRae said quietly.

"Yes, yes, well I wouldn't count on Mr. Roosevelt handling this job. As significant as the Chevron operation may be, there are, how is it said… bigger fish to fry."

"These days fish are usually fried in oil," Fairchild quipped, her point obvious. Then she leaned in, with even more obvious seriousness in her tone.

“Alright, Mr. Salase, I have three empty tankers with two and a half million barrel capacity between them four days from any number of terminal ports in the Middle East or the Med. And I have the ship you are dining on this evening, to make sure they arrive and conduct their business without any problem from the Iranians or anyone else. And yes, I have helicopters as well. We won’t be making a purchase, you understand, just providing conveyance of the oil, and security. What’s the offer?”

“I knew you would see the opportunity inherent in the current situation,” Salase exulted. “I have a firm offer, but you need not worry about the Iranians. This is from a basket of Caspian regional operatives. All negotiations have been managed by my firm in Alexandria. We can offer you a conveyance premium of forty dollars a barrel.”

“The Caspian Consortium? That means a trip to the Black Sea, and soon, before the pipeline through Georgia gets shut down like the BTC line. I’ll want ten dollars a barrel on top of that for the risk,” she said immediately, catching him just a bit unprepared.

Salase shrugged, feigning difficulty. “That will not leave me very much on the margins.”

“Come, come now, a good middle man has any number of ways to pad his invoice. Fifty a barrel for conveyance and security premium. What’s the terminal destination?”

Salase brushed a crumb of bread from his lips, eyes wandering as he spoke. “A familiar route,” he began. “It’s why your company is just the perfect carrier—”

“Where?” She let just a little impatience enter her tone.

“The Royal Vopak’s Banyan Terminal in Singapore.” He said it quickly, taking a sip of wine and watching her over the rim of the glass as he finished. For the first time tonight, he thought, I have my hand up the prissy little lady’s skirt—if she would but wear a skirt. She walks about in trousers and thinks it fashionable. Women in business! What is the world coming to? His smile betrayed nothing of his thoughts as he set down the wine glass.

“Singapore?” She gave MacRae a quick glance. “You mean to tell me the Americans are in a tizzy with this hurricane Victor business shutting down all their refining capacity, and they want to move the oil to *Singapore?”*

“Strictly business,” said Salase. We arranged a buyer in Tokyo, and they’re offering a premium price. The Japanese are very cash rich these days. They can out bid virtually anyone on the Western market when they choose.

And it appears this is such a time. This business with the Chinese has them justifiably worried."

"I see…" Fairchild gave herself a moment to digest this news, a bit angry that her own people didn't have the information, the name of the buyer, the destination port, or any of this latest twist in the offer. Here she thought she would be hauling to the Vopak terminals at Deer Park and Galena on the Texas coast. That route through the Med and across the Atlantic would be much safer.

"The almighty dollar," she breathed, "such as it is these days. I suppose Royal Dutch Shell is in thick as thieves on this deal." Vopak was a large independent Dutch tank terminal operator, with 78 locations in over thirty countries. They had a venerable history, dating back to 1616 when groups of weighmasters and porters began offering weighing, sorting and storage services at Dutch harbors for the cargo shipped in by the East India Trading Company. In fact, they had received and stored the very first shipment of oil to the Netherlands, in 1862, and proudly displayed a photo of the event on their web site.

"Of course," Salase dropped any semblance of pretense now. "It has always been about dollars, or the gold that buys them." It was time for the close. "So what would you like to do?" He waited, knowing that the person who spoke next would come out on the losing end of the deal. The English bitch would most likely have many more considerations, which he had all anticipated before he landed here tonight. There would be mileage, hazardous waters, known piracy zone surcharge, not to mention that she was obviously trying to extricate herself from many of the waterways her precious tankers would now have to travel en route to Singapore.

But Salase knew she could only make good on 60% of the big loan reimbursement Bank of London was calling in next month, and that was assuming her precious *Princess Royal* made it safely through the straits of Hormuz. The company badly needed the other 40% on that credit rollover, another $300 million dollars. With everything in the States shutting down for Hurricane Victor, there would be ample business there for emergency shipments. Perhaps she could get $150 a barrel for the cargo *Princess Royal* held and sell it to the Americans. She would still need another $250 million to cover her loans. Warships were expensive, no matter what color you painted them or how well your hid the guns and missiles.

The Atlantic would probably heat up very soon. Shipping orders were

starting to come in at any of a number of big European ports. But the cargo they needed to deliver was nowhere at hand. Fairchild was well ahead of the game, with good shipping capacity four days south of a very motivated producer right now.

Fairchild needed the deal, and Salase knew she could see the obvious advantages of what he was offering her. He would work it so that she would stand to earn at least $125 million on this caper, and that would get her just a little closer to solvency when she sat down with her bankers next month, assuming she would still be able to walk after the good hard fucking he was about to give her in these negotiations. Salase had information that would soon change the math yet again. In a few days she could get $75 dollars a barrel for mere conveyance on this deal, but he would lock her in here for fifty, perhaps fifty-five all said and done. Yes, he had his hand up her skirt now, in a manner of speaking, and in a minute he would have her legs open as well.

“I’ll need another two dollars for mileage,” she began predictably, and he knew he was going to close the deal. “That’s through the Red Sea, round the Somali coast, which is a known piracy zone, and across the Indian Ocean to more of the same in the Straits of Malacca—very dangerous waters these days.”

“To be sure, but you’ll have to assume *some* risk in the venture. “

“For another three dollars on top of mileage,” she said flatly, folding her hands on the table.

“Lord almighty,” he breathed. “We have already discussed a ten dollar risk premium.”

“That was for the Bosporus-Black Sea leg, an imminent war zone.”

“I’m losing all my profit!” He was lying, of course, and he knew that she was well aware of that fact, but these matters had a certain choreography about them, and he was expected to make some protest at this point, which he did. “That will come out to fifty-five dollars a barrel for mere conveyance against a current barrel price of only $145,” he said, trying to sound distressed.

“Done,” said Fairchild. “Providing Captain MacRae sees no undue security risk that would preclude our operations in the waters described.” She gave him a quick look, knowing what his response would be.

“We’ll handle the situation well enough, I suppose,” he said with that lovely Scottish accent. “Unless things take a severe turn for the worse in the

next week."

"Very well," Fairchild was ready to move on to dinner. "I suppose you brought contracts?"

"Well, this is all very sudden," said Salase. "I was hoping for forty a barrel but—"

"Fifty-five, and if we run into any trouble, at either end or any time while we're in transit, you pay any cost that isn't reimbursed by the insurance carrier."

"But—"

"And if, by any God forsaken stretch we should *lose* a ship on this little venture, then we collect double over insurance premiums. That's a long term loss, and the insurance will hardly compensate me for revenue shortfall until I could replace the vessel."

The little bitch thinks she has me by the balls, he thought, secretly amused. Now it was time for the final act. "Well…" he hesitated just long enough, appearing flustered and cleverly using his napkin to dab his brow, but he knew he had her legs open now, figuratively speaking. He had planned to give her fifty dollars a barrel, and by god that's exactly how it played out, aside from the minor annoyance of that last five dollars for fuel and piracy premiums.

"You drive a very hard bargain," he said. "Alright, you need fifty-five, I'll close for that, but not a dollar more." He extended a hand, with a sinister grin on his face. "Deal?"

"Done," she said, shaking on it. Fairchild was disgusted by the man, presuming he could come in here and dicker with her on conveyance and security charges for an operation like this. The little surprise on the terminal destination cost her a step in the dance, but she had made a good recovery, pushing him up another five dollars a barrel, when she might have settled at fifty under normal circumstances.

"If you manage to take delivery at anything close to your float," Salase said at last, "then you might be well on your way to paying off that credit chip coming due next month, eh? I'm sure you'll find some way of coming up with the remaining funds you need for the Bank of London." He smiled. "Assuming, of course, your sell what you are presently holding on *Princess Royal* at current market prices."

"I beg your pardon?" Elena shifted slightly in her chair, and for a moment it seemed that Salase might indeed have a hand on her leg, though both his

well padded paws were resting comfortably on the table now.

Elena composed herself, tamping down her annoyance at the man's manner. "Yes, I've a three million barrels sitting on *Princess Royal*, dear Mr. Salase—and I *own* that oil. At current market price, as you so wisely note, that will fetch me a tidy sum. I'll expect to get closer to $150 a barrel on that oil, if not more by the time I get around to delivering it. Lock-ins on price are very slippery these days, particularly in emergency situations. What with all this hurricane business at Houston, the Americans will be paying top dollar."

"Pity they can't get their own oil producers to stop selling to the Japanese," said Salase, "but I suppose if things get worse in the Pacific they'll do something about that as well. No hurricane has struck British shores of late, and the price there is a flat hundred pounds, so consider my suggestion that you sell to the Americans if the price of a barrel goes much above that, loyal servant of the Crown that you are." His smile had a bit of a barb to it now.

"If you know so much about my financial arrangements," said Fairchild, "then you can see I have my credit call well in sight. I'm wagering *Princess Royal* is carrying at least $450 million in her holds right this moment, and perhaps more. This little bit I'm picking up here for simple conveyance is just a nudge in the right direction. That would put me over $580 million, and I can take the rest out of petty cash." She smiled sweetly. "*Argos Fire* is ready to lead my little fleet to the Bosporus tomorrow. We have long range helicopters, and perhaps we can provide some security for this customer, but that will come at a cost as well. Our first priority, however, will be to take on his cargo at either Kulevi oil terminal on the Black Sea coast, or at Supsa, assuming the Americans have a bunker credit there…" she waited, a question in her eyes.

"Of course, Miss Fairchild. It has all been arranged."

"Excellent. Then might I suggest something, Mister Salase? My tanker in the Persian Gulf is much closer to Singapore, and I own that oil. Suppose I were to offer it to your Japanese buyer in fulfillment of this conveyance contract you've been trying to arrange."

"How generous," Salase beamed. He knew she would get round to this in time, and there it was, her final card on the table. Now he would play out his trump card and run the spades home.

"Then that would still leave you free to convey the Chevron oil to other destinations, perhaps the Americans, as you suggested earlier. But you will

have need of great hurry. Yes, I should have known you would have this deal well thought out. You are a very formidable businesswoman, Miss Fairchild. And of course your intelligence services would have the very same information that came through our network yesterday, so I suppose you have already factored that in to your calculations." He let that hang a moment for effect, and could almost feel her resolve falter a bit. It was the sweetest moment in any close—the moment when you reveal that one last tidbit of information your adversary had failed to consider. Yes, her legs were wide open at last, he thought. Now for the *coup de gras*.

"Information?" She raised her eyebrows, ever so slightly, "What exactly are you referring to. I'm afraid I have to confess the destination on this little run did come as a surprise. I underestimated the greed of the Americans—sell their own damn oil to the Japanese while Houston gets slammed by a hurricane? I can't stack that up against my good sense for profit when I see it."

"Of course," said Salase, still smiling. "No, I was referring to the information on the security situation in the Persian Gulf. It seems your *Princess Royal* is going to hit a mine some time tomorrow. You knew this, of course. Perhaps you were even counting on it, because the price of oil is truly going to skyrocket if it happens as planned." The certainty of his remark was a nice sharp jab, and he could almost feel the woman jump.

Captain MacRae shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his hand in his pocket fingering the latest intelligence decrypt he had picked up from the radio room—the mines! He had not found a moment to inform his CEO, and now she was adrift at sea in the negotiation and about to hit one herself.

Elena was taken aback by the statement. What was this bloated pig of a man talking about? *Going* to hit a mine? if it happens as *planned?* She could feel the heat rising on the back of her neck. Her people should have had this—a direct threat to a company ship? Good God, what was going on here? What did this man know that her Intel service could have so blatantly missed? She fought down the anger.

"Of course," she said at last, though her face had turned a shade of pale rose. It was the first noticeable loss of control MacRae had ever seen her suffer in a public negotiation, and he knew she had been completely surprised by the information. There would be no rest on the *Argos Fire* tonight, he realized. Mack Morgan, the Intel Master was going to have a lot of questions to answer for not getting this sooner. Perhaps he could save Mack a finger or

two if he spoke up now.

“Excuse me, m’lady, but we *do* have something to discuss concerning that development. Perhaps after dinner you and I can have a chat.” He was signaling her that he had information, perhaps even a plan, a high face card or two in hand, and he hoped it would be enough to help her regain her composure.”

Dinner was served, thankfully just at that moment, giving Elena Fairchild a brief cover to settle herself. But as Salase eyed the sumptuous fare, he could feel the woman’s discomfort in the silence, and she would sit there and take it as long as he desired. At least until dessert had been served. Oh there would be little run ups of conversation aimed at ferreting out the scope of the threat, a trip to the powder room so she could scream shrill orders over a radio and notify the Captain of *Princess Royal.* And then she would be begging the Americans in the Persian Gulf for a frigate to escort her precious little princess through the Straits, based on ‘credible information from an unnamed source,’ of course.

And when they find out the rest; when the missile fires and the oil starts burning… He smiled, pretending to enjoy his meal. Ah, he thought, it was great to be a man. Women had no place in business matters like these. He was going to enjoy this dinner. The poached salmon looked particularly tasty tonight.

Day 2

The Descent

“Day was departing… and I, the only one,
made myself ready to sustain the war…
Tell me why thou dost not shun
The descent into this centre,
from the vast place thou burnest to return to…
the deep and savage way?”

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto II

Part V

Wayward Son

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

—Luke 15:3-7

Chapter 13

“Fox Three, Fox Three! Missiles away!” Lieutenant Peter Tang looked at his flight panel, saw the hostile radar lock warning, and made the decision to fire in a heartbeat—but he was too late. He looked over his shoulder at the other three planes in his subflight and saw their missiles streaking away after his, rocketing into the sky above where the unseen enemy had fingered them with targeting radar. He knew damn well what was coming next.

“Countermeasures!” he yelled into his comm-set. “Break formation and every man for himself!” Then he pulled his F-16 into high G turn, tipped into a dive and poured on the power. So much for breakfast.

Tang was up early that morning, along with all the other pilots in his F-16 squadron. Early mess was at 05:00 hours where he had eaten with his buddy Alex Wu and the newcomer, Kevin Lo. Their Americanized names were all too common in the breakaway Republic, where well over 80% of the population adopted and used English given names. You couldn’t even fill out a job or college entrance exam application in Taiwan without listing your English name these days, but call them what you will, these were the Squadron leaders who would have their butts in the seats on Alert One scramble duty this morning—top of the list.

Tang was operating with the 401st Tactical Fighter Wing out of Hualien AFB on the northeastern coast of Taiwan. His 17th Group *Thor* was among the best in the service, flying F-16A/B *Falcons*, and charged with defense of the airspace over Taipei. His good friend, Alex Wu had just made 1st Lieutenant himself and was now assigned to the 27th *Black Dragon* group along with his new sidekick, Lt. Kevin Lo. They were out in the ready rooms when the first reports came in—missile warning—for they were not the only men of war up early that day.

400 Kilometers to the west, in the hilly inland country stretching from Shantou to Fushou in China, the Dong Feng ballistic missiles were up as well, their red tipped noses rising to meet the dawn. In the year 1232, the Chinese repelled Mongol invaders during the battle of Kai-Keng by using the primitive rockets powered by gunpowder, the first known use of that seemingly magical black powder as a weapon of war. The ‘arrows of flying fire’ had come a long way since then.

By 2021 China had amassed a fearsome ballistic missile arsenal to confront Taiwan. US analysts estimated there were at least 1500 missiles available. There were 1800, and of these 600 DF-11s were deployed for the overture, about 50 improved to extend their range to 825 kilometers. These could strike any target on the Taiwanese mainland, though the bulk of the inventory with shorter 300 kilometer ranges would be used against targets on the eastern shores of the wayward island republic. The DF-11s were largely carried by mobile launch trucks, their engines growling on the coastal hills of mainland China that morning as one battery after another signaled 'armed and ready.' 300 were available for launch with in twenty minutes of the order to fire, and the order had finally come.

The first batteries began to launch a little after 07:00 hours on the morning of September 25, the second day of the Great War that the world had nervously been awaiting. Now the political squabbles and pipeline attacks of the previous day would become something far more serious. All that came before in the contentious waters of the Diaoyutai Islands and the turbulent black seas of the Gulf of Mexico were but foreshocks. The Chinese missile launch against two American satellites overflying their territory was deemed to be a defensive measure, but this was something else entirely. The Dragon had finally opened its maw and spewed fire and anger at its wayward son. The *East Wind* of its hot breath was blowing in a hard rain of steel, with missiles roaring from their mobile launch pads and streaking up into the clear morning sky.

The US built PAVE PAWS Phased Array Warning System on the high peaks of Taiwan's rugged mountains east of Hsinchu City were the first to see the threat, and orders were flashed to SAM batteries all over the island. US built Patriot battery radars could range out only about 170 kilometers, not enough to see the missiles in their initial launch and boost phase, but the Phased Array system gave them six precious minutes to deploy and arm their systems for intercept operations. There were ten Patriot batteries in all, three assigned to Taipei, three to the Taichung region and the remaining four to cities in the southern reaches of the island. They were each capable of firing either four PAC-2/GEM or sixteen PAC-3 missiles per launcher, and each battery had eight launchers. That put 32 active PAC-2/GEMs or as many as 128 PAC-3s in a battery, a formidable missile defense if they could perform as advertised.

150 missiles were up in the first Chinese launch. The world had not see

anything like it since the MLRS rocket artillery barrage that had preceded the first Gulf War. Five minutes later a second barrage of 150 missiles were darkening the skies as the *East Wind* began to blow in earnest. Soon the deadly duel of Patriot versus ballistic missile began, and no one really knew what the likely percentage of successful intercepts would be. One of the first targets was the sole PAVE PAWS Radar that had spotted and announced the incoming strike, defended by a single Patriot battery. Thirty missiles were assigned to this one target alone, and though the Patriots were good, and scored many stunning intercepts and kills, they did not get them all. Twelve got through the defense, slamming into the hilltop and sending huge columns of black smoke and fire into the sky as their 800kg warheads exploded on impact. Three of the twelve were close enough to the main radar itself to do serious damage—enough to blacken the stations capabilities and put it out of the battle for the foreseeable future.

Lieutenant Peter Tang heard the scramble alert and he and his men were up and rushing to their planes. His ready group was on the black tarmac and juiced for action, and within minutes he was leading a section of four planes out onto the main runway for takeoff. The tails spewed their white fire as the engines hurtled the nimble fighters aloft.

Tang looked out to see the first of the Patriot batteries north of the base beginning to fire, the thin white contrails of the missiles scoring the sky. He knew the air defense crews in the Skyguard and Antelope short range SAM defense batteries would be busy soon as well. As he banked right, climbing past 15,000 feet he saw what the Patriots were firing at. Missile trails seemed to be coming down from heaven itself, and he knew the base was being hit by a heavy salvo of Dong Fengs. There were two spectacular intercepts by patriots that set his pilots to cheering before the first of the range modified DF-11s exploded just north of the field.

They couldn’t even hit the damn runway, he thought, and then the colossal explosion at the north end of the main airstrip gave him a hard kick as he remembered the aviation fuel depot there—fourteen big tanks loaded with fuel and lubricant oils, and two DF-11’s had plowed right into them, sending an enormous pillar of fire and oily black smoke erupting skyward. The rest of the salvo hit the runway.

While Taiwanese Air Defense crews were heartened by their initial kill ratio, with PAVE PAWS off line they could no longer see the second wave of 150 missiles as they reached apogee and tipped over to make their blistering

descent towards their targets. A minute later the Patriots began to acquire and fire, but two more waves of DF-11s were ready to join battle if deemed necessary. The second wave saw successful intercepts reduce considerably from a little over 50% to just under 40%, which meant that about seventy missiles found targets in the first wave, and another eighty-two blasted home in the second wave. The damage these big warheads were inflicting was considerable.

You never get them all, he thought. Not even close. Some of the damn missiles always get through. They got through in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem when Israel and Iran traded blows in a brief, bloody exchange in 2014, and they're going to get through here. They have more missiles and planes than we have SAMs! It was a sobering thought as the voice of his buddy Alex Wu, or 'Alley Ho' as he called him, came over his headset.

"You up there for the show, Pete?"

"Seeing more than I wished," Tang called back. "They hit the fuel depot!"

"Going to be thirsty this afternoon then, Tang. So don't pull any high G barrel rolls up here."

"Not unless I have a J-20 on my ass," Tang called back. "See you upstairs, Alley Ho." He wondered if he would have a functioning base to return to in the hours ahead. His *Falcon* was not known for its endurance, though he knew tankers would be up in the next hour in the seas east of the island—if they could make it off the airfields in one piece.

Air bases on Taiwan took the brunt of the missile barrages, a deliberate and methodical interdiction intended to prepare the way for things Peter Tang and his mates would soon be contending with in the skies over the island. There were a hundred and fifty F-16s and another 56 Mirage 2000 fighters, most well overdue for the scrap yards by 2021. Taiwan had hoped to buy better F-16Ds from the US, but a skittish congress and budget problems never saw the planned purchase go through.

So the old *Falcons* would form the bulk of the air defense, supported by 126 of the indigenous F-CK-1A/B fighter interceptors, dubbed "the little fuckers" by US pilots that had trained with them over the years due to the obvious missing letter in their designation. They were capable interceptors, with over 70 upgraded to the new *Hsiung Ying* C/D (Brave Hawk) model, but would be overmatched by their adversaries on the mainland in due course. The alert ready squadrons climbed up into the angry sky to take up their defensive patrol stations while their brothers behind them would have to deal

with the cratered runways when the DF-11s began to hit home.

It soon became clear that this initial barrage was largely aimed at military installations, ports and airfields, and that China's primary strategy was to try and defeat Taiwan's defenses before the United States could intervene. An hour after the first massive barrage of 300 missiles, another 300 were being deployed and ready to strike in three waves of 100 each.

Unwilling to stand simply on defense, Taiwan immediately ordered up some bad weather of its own—the *Hsiung Feng* cruise missile, or *Brave Wind* with a 600 kilometer range, and the more dangerous *Yunfeng* with an extended range of up to 2000 kilometers. While only fifty of these longer range missiles had been produced, they would be able to strike a range of targets in mainland China, including Air Force Regional headquarters, Naval bases, fighter and bomber divisions, even as far away as Beijing and Shanghai. Taiwan could deliver one good shock to her adversary, because even though the Chinese had a very robust SAM umbrella themselves, Tang had been correct—you never get them all. It would be enough to save face and rattle the nerves of the people in heavily populated cities when the missiles came in, but not enough to seriously degrade China's military capability. The *Brave Wind* was just that, an audacious reprisal intended to inflict short term pain, but it was one the PLA would answer in spades. The *East Wind* was a storm of serious hurt, and it carried more than ballistic missiles.

The DF-11's were just the opening round. By the time the second series of 300 missiles had concluded their barrages, there had been over 200 that hit home on or very near their intended targets. The port at the off shore archipelago of Makung was hit with quays blasted, fuel and ammunition storage bungers in flames and one of the three frigates that had been berthed there was struck at her berthing. The *Chi Yang*, a Knox class frigate, was the first ship of the Taiwan Navy to feel the Dragon's bite, sinking quickly in a raging fire. Two other frigates berthed there, the *Fong Yang* and *Fen Yang* were quickly hauling anchors and racing out to sea even as another spectacular near miss saw a DF-11 send a massive geyser of water skyward in the harbor. Airfields at Hualien, Tainan, Chiayi and Taitung had all been hit, but the cities near them were assiduously spared.

It was then that Lt. Peter Tang saw the threat vector data feed from the E-2C AWACS now coordinating long range surveillance. Enemy fighters were inbound at high altitude, and Tang called to his squadron mates to rally them

for the battle ahead. The pilots were brave and well trained, but the odds they would soon be facing were very steep. The Chinese had learned a hard lesson when they scrambled older J-10 and J-11 fighters in their recent duel with Japan over the Diaoyutai Islands.

This time they were sending their best, the one plane Tang was really worried about, the formidable J-20. These were the planes Lt. Matt Eden had warned about when he said the ‘Bats’ were redeploying to coastal airfields days ago, and the same planes defense expert Reed had called ‘Vampires’ when he tried to explain them to the White House Chief of Staff. They were China’s A game, their premier fifth generation stealth fighter, and they trumped any older legacy fighter the Air Force of Taiwan could put in front of them.

It had taken the Chinese some time to get the planes fully wired and ramped up for mass production. By 2021 the plane was a fully integrated and well tested strike fighter and China had built 120 for front line deployment. They were being flown by an elite if limited corps of highly skilled pilots, the very best graduates from the flight schools and military training programs.

The J-20s formed up in three heavy strike squadrons of twenty planes each, half the available inventory. They would be accompanied by some other very capable friends, for China had also produced several squadrons of J-16 ‘Silent Flankers’ in response to similar programs mounted by the US with their ‘Silent Eagle.’ Only thirty-two in number, the J-16 was really a modified J-11B that incorporated rudimentary stealth features. It took a very good plane and made it better, and thirty were aloft in the vanguard, leading in the J-20s. To either side of this central formation of ninety planes were two groups composed of J-10 and J-11 fighters, thirty each. The first major air strike against the beleaguered island would therefore come from 150 planes.

The attack was aimed at the air defense gap between Hsinchu and Taichung, preceded by a wave of truck launched CJ-10 *Long Sword* cruise missiles aimed at two key targets in the breakthrough zone. One was the coastal radar site at Houlong, and the other was the single HAWK battery near Miaoli City. If it was taken down the overlapping circles of SAM coverage would lapse in this one area, and leave a gap in the defense. While those two cities deployed robust SAM defenses, the gap between them was more sparsely defended. Their aim was to break through this HAWK battery and streak in high over the central highlands and then sweep north to the big naval base at Suao. Others would come in at Taipei from the south, though a

few groups had some very special missions.

The J-20s were targeted at the big dam facilities that held in the Shimen Reservoir supplying water to more than three million people in northern Taiwan. Other dams controlling water flowing from the bigger FeiTs'ui / Feicui Reservoir would also be targeted, and within thirty minutes of their destruction an uncontrolled cascade of water would come surging down the two major rivers flowing from the highlands down into the capitol of TaiPei.

The heart of the formation came in very high while flights of J-10s and J-11s peeled off at lower altitudes, bait for the HAWKs armed with strike missiles to engage the SAM batteries. They would try to forge a way through the defenses that had already been heavily saturated by the Dong Feng 11s. The cutting edge of the SAM defenses were the ten Patriot batteries, but its backbone was a much older system of the HAWK SAMs, an acronym that stood for "Homing All the Way Killer," that were slowly being phased out and replaced by the Sky Bow II systems. While many of the better missiles had been tasked to take on the Dong Feng barrages, the HAWKs were still vital links in the defense to face the threat from aircraft. There was only one small problem, the flight ceiling of the missiles was about 45,000 feet, and so while the J-10s and J-11s swooped in to engage, the J-20s were about to demonstrate one of those often neglected statistics that would make them so deadly, a service ceiling exceeding 65,000 feet. In effect the plane could out fly the missiles that were supposed to shoot it down! The HAWKs were homing all the way, but could not reach their targets before they flamed out.

The Vampires were flying high that morning, out from their hidden caves in the hills of the homeland. When the Chinese strike group broke through the coastal defense network, the F-16s were immediately vectored in to close the gap. They had a good idea where the enemy was coming in high with their main strike package, but the F-16s were straining for altitude as they climbed to meet the enemy. The Chinese J-20 was not easy to find and track. Their returns were not solid on radar, and they came and went. None of the F-16s could seem to hold a steady signal lock and it was coming down to that nebulous line in BVR combat where you either fire or die.

Tang elected to fire. His subflight of four falcons were the first to callout out the NATO brevity code "Fox Three" as their AIM-120C missiles were sent into battle. An active radar seeker, this version of the missile had a good range of 105 kilometers, and could switch to passive homing if jammed. Tang was hoping his missiles could get some of the high flying Chinese

fighters “in the basket” of their active radar search sweep where they had a chance to lock on. While capable of receiving in-flight data to assist in a course correction to find the enemy target, Tang’s fighters weren’t going to be able to send anything. They were about to have some very troublesome company in the skies over the central highlands.

High above, some 15,000 feet beyond the service ceiling of the F-16, the J-20s had a long range missile of their own to send into battle. They had easily seen, tracked and targeted the climbing F-16s and had already fired China’s latest long range lance in the deadly game of air to air missile combat —the the P-21 *Thunderbolt*. By the time Lieutenants Peter Tang, Alex Wu and Kevin Lo detected the radar lock it was already too late. Alex Wu heard his mate call out “Fox Three” and followed suit to fire his missiles, but it was going to be a very busy morning that day, and for all of them it would be their last.

Chapter 14

As if the Chinese attack on Taiwan and the imminent conflict at sea with the Russian Pacific Fleet were not enough, another old nemesis was now crashing the party with familiar threatening rhetoric that was now deemed to be very dangerous. The candles were burning late in the White House Situation Room that night, as William Reed sat uncomfortably in his chair looking at the satellite photography.

"It's a dual launch," he said calmly. "Fits the pattern we've seen in recent years. Close-ups on the nose of those birds look a little ominous."

Air Force General Henry Lane folded his arms, eyes tight as he listened. "Our people don't think it's a nuke," he said.

"You want to play Russian Roulette here, General?" Reed had no qualms about engaging the brass in a spirited discussion. That was what he was there for. "I hope we have adequate defensive assets in theater by now, because it looks like another fuse is about to be lit here."

"We've got a full squadron of twelve F-22 *Raptor* fighters at Osan AFB in South Korea to beef up fighter defenses there." Lane was looking at his deployment list. "Similar packages are slated for Okinawa and mainland Japan, but it I'm afraid it's a little too late to get them to Taiwan."

"We should have had them there a week ago," said Reed, "but I guess 'should of' never won a race. Looks like the Chinese mean business this time. Word is they hit the Taiwanese with at least 600 missiles."

"We took down a good number of those with the ABM batteries."

"Not enough, General. They beat up the airfields pretty bad over there, and then punched through with those damn J-20s."

White House Chief of Staff Leyman leaned forward, a question in his eyes. "Those the same planes we talked about earlier, Mister Reed?"

"Yes sir, fast, deadly, and now a proven threat. The Chinese blew a hole in the coastal defense perimeter and pushed in a major strike package at high altitude. They were up above the service ceiling of the HAWK systems over there. Patriots were the only thing that could get up there, and they were saturated by the missiles. What we need now are assets in theater for a counterattack, but forgive me if I say I'm more than a little nervous about this North Korean launch prep. Everything we've moved into the Pacific in the last 48 hours is sitting on Guam."

“Talks are underway with Manila to obtain basing rights there,” said Leyman.

“Another Raptor squadron was deployed as theater reserve at Anderson on Guam,” Lane put in. “If the situation warrants, we can move those birds to the Phils. We’ll have some heavy metal to throw around today as well.” The US was digging up ‘the bones,’ flights of B-1 *Lancer* Bombers that were arriving on Guam by the hour.

At that very moment Captain Hap Jason of 7th Bomb Wing out of Dyess AFB in Abeline Texas was on the radio at 311.000 MHZ STRATCOM PRIMARY for some routine radio traffic. He was coordinating a rendezvous with KC-135 Air refueling tankers designated GASSR-11 and GASSR-12.

“Dark flight of twelve requesting ETA on GASSR 11. We’ll need Tanker Drag to BAB, over.” BAB was the call sign for Beale AFB in California as the bombers prepared to top off before they started the long flight across the Pacific.

Jason’s squadron, “Dark 1” would soon be joined by another designated “Slam -1” out of Ellsworth AFB. At Guam their bellies would soon be filled with extended range 2000 lb GBU 3 JDAMS. The Joint Direct Attack Munitions was a kit installed on ‘dumb’ bombs that would convert them into GPS guided munitions, and the new satellite that would direct them was already being moved to compensate for the loss of two GPS birds when the Chinese launched their preemptive ASAT strike. The bombs could be dropped from an amazing range of 80 kilometers out and still fall unerringly to their targets.

The bomber squadrons were being accompanied by two E-6 Mercury airborne command post planes out of Tinker AFB, an ominous sign as these planes were cast in the TACAMO role for coordination of battle orders to US nuclear capable assets, including both boomers and bombers. They were once coded “Looking Glass” for their ability to mirror or duplicate the control of nuclear capable facilities in the event that the Global Operations Center at Offut AFB was destroyed or otherwise off-line. The nuclear giant was waking up, and slowly stretching in bed, flexing its muscle for the long planned war that no one wanted yet everyone was prepared to wage.

Out on Guam, the B-1s would be joined by the ‘Batwings,’ B-2 stealth bombers flying from Missouri. The B-2s could deploy, strike targets, and then return to those bases if necessary, but many were now scheduled to muster at Anderson AFB on Guam to be more readily available in theater.

Even the old B-52s, with well over 50 years in active service, were also on the move from Nellis AFB in Nevada and Barksdake AFB in Louisiana, all headed for the vital forward operations base at Guam. One thing was certain that night, the heavy iron was airborne and flying west over the Pacific, ready for battle.

Missile defenses there were beefing up on the tiny island outpost as well. The THAAD Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile batteries were already arriving. Deployed from mobile truck systems like the Patriot, THAAD was designed to find, track, and hit ballistic missiles in their re-entry phase and destroy them by kinetic impact.

As to the satellites, discussion was over in the White House Situation Room. While the US and China had not yet faced off against one another with direct military assets, the Chinese ASAT attacks were deemed hostile acts and it was decided to quickly reply in kind. The US *Skybolt* system had been resurrected in 2018 as part of the DOD's Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle (EELV) Program. The need for redundant ASAT capability had become apparent, and the system now used an air launched version of the SM-3 Anti-Ballistic Missile on US AEGIS capable ships. Late on the second day of the war, the *Skybolts* were flying to repay China in kind for the pre-emptive strikes on US satellites prior to their attack on Taiwan.

At the same time the US was quick to get new assets in place, and a Delta IV at Vandenberg was launched to put another GPS satellite into mid-level orbit at 20,350 kilometers. The Pentagon had already decided they would take immediate steps to prevent any further attacks on its satellites by China, and the B-2s mustered at Anderson would soon be airborne with a little surprise for the Chinese.

Tech Sergeant Jason Banks was up early that day, out of the HC-5 barracks and through the line in the chow hall to hit the tarmac by 05:00 hours. The base was on full wartime footing and the activity had been frenetic the last 48 hours. Yet all the many years of drills and practice exercises paid off, and the whole operation was running smoothly, under the watchful eyes of Master Sergeants from one end of the airfield to another. The Captains and Lieutenants might be flying the planes, but down on the ground things got done on the E level pay grades, and done with precision and skilled expertise that was par for the course.

Banks met up with his special work detail, an E-4 Senior Airman and a couple grease monkeys and bomb bay brats on loadout operations. The B-2

was an awesome plane, its silhouette so striking and unusual when viewed from certain angles that it had often been reported as a UFO. The ordnance trucks had just pulled into the hanger and the special delivery had arrived.

Airman Thomas Knox was the first man on the job, detailed to unload and prep the missiles prior to final mounting. “Holy shit, will you look at those baby’s” he said as Banks watched the first missile on the hoist, hands on his hips, a toothpick still in his mouth from breakfast. “It looks like a god-damned shark! How fast you figure this thing is, Sarge?”

“Fast enough, Tommy Knockers, just watch that hoist and run your hydraulics.”

“Hell this thing looks mean. No wings or tail, Sarge. How does the damn thing fly?”

“That’s classified, Knox. All you need to know is that you load a pair and get it done by zero-six flat, kapish?”

It was mean, and it was also very, very fast. The weapon was called the X-51C, a hypersonic stealthy cruise missile developed by Boeing that was dubbed the *WaveRider* because it rode its own shockwave for lift, and therefore did not need wings. Originally tested on the older B-52s and designed as a technology demonstrator, the weapon was moved into production in 2018 and a limited inventory was available for this special strike mission. The marriage of a fast, stealthy cruise missile with the B-2 was inevitable, as the B-2s could carry two of the X-51s and, given their proven ability to penetrate hostile airspace undetected, the new weapon’s effectiveness was practically guaranteed.

With a range of 740 kilometers, the X-51 was propelled by an MGM-140 ATACMS solid rocket booster to achieve an initial speed of Mach 4.5 after launch. This first stage would be ejected and then the second stage would ignite a Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne SJY61 scramjet that moved the shark-nosed cruise missile to Mach 6.0 and beyond. The first targets assigned to the B-2s would be the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center and the Guangde Rocket launch site west of Shanghai, respectively known as Base 25 and Base 603. These targets were within 500 kilometers of the coast and could be struck by B-2s over the South or East China Seas.

The Xichang Satellite Launch Center, or Base 27, which handled most of China’s GPS satellite launches, was a tougher nut to crack, as it was more than 1000 kilometers inland. The B-2s would be required to penetrate and overfly the Chinese mainland before launching their missiles. An alternate

route was devised for the bombers to quickly cross the narrow neck of Vietnam, then turn north over Laos and approach the base from the south. Once the missiles were launched and airborne, they were virtually unstoppable.

"My, my," Knox went on chattering. "Look what momma's bringing home to Texas." Sergeant Banks and his detail were working on bomber AV-7, the *Spirit of Texas*, in active service in the B-2 fleet since 1994. The "Spirits" were all lined up in the hangers that morning, *Missouri, California, South Carolina, Washington and Kansas*, Banks home state. They were all assigned to the famous 13th Bomb Squadron of the 509th Operations Group out of Whiteman AFB, Missouri. Formed in 1917, the Squadron had been hit on the ground at Port Moresby by the Japanese in the second World War, and lost all their B-25s. They were reconstituted with A-20 Havocs and raised hell for the duration of the war. Over the years they flew the A-26 Invaders in the Korean War, and a thousand sorties in Vietnam with the B-57 Canberra. Years later they moved on to the B-1B *Lancers* and now they were flying something quite different than the old B-25s from WWII.

"I never will get used to these things," said Knox as he looked at the B-2. They don't even look like a plane. Hey Sarge," Knox grinned at his Tech Sergeant. "Why in hell would anyone want to name a something like this Spirit of Kansas?"

"Load the weapons, Knox, not the bullshit. You come on down to Topeka sometime and I'll show you some good food and good bars to go with it."

"They let you drink in Kansas? I thought all you guys did down there was smoke that damn blue grass until you were blue in the face."

"*You're* gonna be blue in the face if you don't wire that jaw shut, Knoxwurst. I'm going down the line to check on Harley's group. When I get back here that first missile better be in the bay and ready to rumble."

"Don't worry, Sarge. I'll have 'em both up and ready in no time." Knox waved at another Airman and maneuvered the ordnance cart under the planes enormous wing, heading for the central bomb bay under the plane's fat fuselage. "Look out, Watson! Here comes the doom buggy. Outta my way."

Banks shook his head and started down the line. Doom indeed he thought, wondering what was in the warheads on these sleek new cruise missiles. He had heard a little about them and knew they were fast as greased lightning, with a heavy wallop. Chinese asked for it, he thought. So we'll serve dinner tonight—take out. They won't even see the damn planes coming, let alone

the missiles.

The distant wail of an alert siren cut through the pre-dawn stillness, its shrill warning suddenly sending a shiver up the Sergeant's back. You didn't hear that all too often out here, unless the weather was real bad and there was a high wind warning up. Something about it chilled him, even in the humid, languid airs of the base. He listened intently, suddenly realizing what the siren meant.

"Christ almighty!" he said aloud, stopping and looking back over his shoulder at Knox and the rest of the crew. "On the double, gentlemen—we've got incoming!"

* * *

Guam sat in the middle of the vast Pacific ocean like a big New York strip steak. The fat end of the steak was in the south of the thirty kilometer long island, where Naval Base Guam established facilities for the Commander of Naval Region Marianas, and Submarine Squadron 15, with three *Los Angeles* Class subs in attendance. The bay was empty that morning, as all three boats were out to sea, heading north at high speed now to screen the advance of CVBG *Washington*. South of the harbor was the big Joint Region Marianas Ordnance Annex, where both conventional and nuclear weapons were stockpiled for the navy. It was one of two large depots in the island. The narrower strip of the steak in the north was the site of Anderson AFB and the base munitions storage area where tons of ordnance were stored in a wide area of underground bunkers. Just west of this area was the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Station, with the Marlock 25 meter satellite tracking antenna.

The assets now being gathered on the island and its strategic location made it one of the most valuable US bases in the Pacific, perhaps second only to Pearl Harbor and Hawaii. As such it would soon become a rich target of opportunity for anyone wishing to wage war against the Americans. China had not yet fired on US territory in anger, their ASAT attack being deemed "defensive" in nature in the debates still raging in the UN. This thin rein of restraint still held the Chinese in check even as their missiles launched on Taiwan. But China had other wayward sons, and the volatile regime in North Korea was one of them, with the world's fourth largest standing army snarling at the south across the DMZ.

North Korea would do the dirty work and launch the first blow, or so it had been planned. This would present the US with the impossible choice of having to attack North Korea and bring it into the war if they acted in reprisal. The nightmare scenario of having to defend Japan, South Korea and Taiwan at the same time was now becoming a dire reality.

Defense analyst Reed had argued that the US should take prompt preventative measures and destroy the *Musudans* on the launch pad before they could fire. “This deployment appears to be identical to the tests we observed earlier,” he said hotly. “If I’m correct, then we’ve got to get the damn things in their boost phase. Once they hit apogee it will be too late.”

“We still have THAAD out on Guam, Mister Reed,” Air Force General Lane replied. “The system is tried and true. We can get these missiles just as they tip into their descent phase.”

“And what if they explode *before* they tip over, general?” Reed gave the Air Force officer a wide eyed challenge. “What then?”

Lane eyed the feisty analyst, inwardly resenting a civilian trying to tell him how to do his job, but he realized what Reed was getting at. “You are suggesting this is an asymmetrical weapon?”

“Damn right I am! They still can’t hit the broad side of a barn from three feet away, but they can get a missile close enough to put some serious hurt on the assets at Guam. All it has to do is get up over the island and go kaboom.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rod Leyman, White House Chief of Staff. “What good will that do them, even with a nuclear bomb if they have one? Don’t they have to hit the island itself?”

“EMP,” Reed said flatly. “That’s what’s written all over this deployment, Mister Leyman, and General Lane here knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Electro Magnetic Pulse,” said Lane. “A high altitude explosion would have a fairly wide footprint.”

“Which is why you have to either get the missiles before they launch,” said Reed, “or else that footprint is going to stomp on every computer and electronic device on that island and you can write the whole place off as an effective operational military base.”

“We can put cruise missiles on that launch site in a heartbeat,” said General Lane. “I’ve got bones at Kadena on Okinawa, B-1 bombers. They’re ready on the Tarmac now.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Reed argued.

“He’s waiting because the President has yet to make the decision to strike the first blow here, Mister Reed. To do so we will have to make a direct military attack on a regime in North Korea wound up tighter than a coiled spring. We already have a hornet’s nest on our hands in Taiwan. All we need is for a million North Koreans to come surging over the border into the Seoul, right?”

Then word came in that the North Koreans had already fired *Musudan I* and the tension in the room was palpable. As the minutes passed, Reed shifted uncomfortably in his chair, tapping his pen on a notepad in front of him. They were too late, or so he thought. The missile was going to explode at high altitude and send a violent EMP burst through the atmosphere that would knock the base off the operational list for the foreseeable future, but this time he was proved wrong. The US had picked up the launch by satellite, tracked it through the ascent phase and then keyed assets to intercept as it passed through apogee and began its terminal descent.

The *Musudan* tipped over and it was soon bait for the very capable ABM systems the US had deployed on the island for just this contingency. Alpha Battery, 4th Air Defense Artillery Regiment on Guam was given the order to fire, and it sent up two THAAD missiles using the “hit-to-kill” strategy to destroy the incoming *Musudan* by kinetic impact.

The first shot was an easy kill for the advanced US ABM system, and the rhetoric that accompanied the attack would end up being far worse than the event itself. North Korean media announced that the US and its allies were “waging madcap war maneuvers against it to plan a pre-emptive nuclear strike.” They were not too far off the mark with that one, because there were *two* rockets positioned on the east coast of North Korea, and defense analyst Reed and others like him now believed they knew what the second missile housed in its red tipped nose.

Musudan II was indeed carrying an EMP super-bomb, technology the North Koreans had obtained from the Russians years ago through espionage. Their first shot was just target practice to test US defenses as much as anything else. By watching the destruction of the first missile, the North Korean military could reap the political harvest while also determining the approximate altitude of the kill so they could set their warhead to explode well before the US ABM system could do its job. It would raise the altitude of their intended detonation, and also increase the lethal footprint of the effects on the earth below. If *Musudan II* fired as planned, and did its

intended job, there wouldn't be a silicon circuit worth the name functional on Guam and surrounding areas for hundreds of miles.

An hour later *Musudan II* fired as planned.

Reed was still in the situation room when it happened, now permanent staff there to keep his well educated iron in the fires of the heated debate. He was stewing because General Lane had given him that 'I told ya so' smirk when THAAD took down the first missile without any trouble.

"Have a little faith, Mister Reed," he had admonished. "We know what we're doing here."

"Right," said Reed. "Well don't be surprised if this one explodes at apogee."

"It's not ever going to get there," said Lane, cool and unruffled. "We have a few more surprises in store for Mister Kim Jong-Un."

The B-1s on Kadena were not the only bones the Air Force had dug up from the boneyards. They had pulled something out of the hangers at 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Tucson, Arizona. It was called YAL-1, formerly known as the Airborne Laser Project, a prototype aircraft from a program cancelled years ago because of its expense. The Air Force had been secretly preparing to test it in a live scenario like this, secretly moving it into the Pacific. It was up early that morning from Kadena, escorted by a pair of F-22 *Raptors*.

The US intelligence was so good that they even intercepted the North Korean signal ordering the second missile fired. When it roared to life, its hot exhaust tail red with fire as it rose from the launch site to break through the thin cloud layer above, YAL-1 was waiting in ambush in the skies above Japan. It was orbiting at an altitude of 45,000 feet in a typical 'racetrack' pattern, a specially modified jumbo jet, the 747-400F.

Infrared sensors on the plane had already detected the launch and were ready to respond as the *Musudan* missile clawed its way into the sky in its initial boost phase. A low-power targeting and tracking laser was already locking onto the missile as fast computers calculated its trajectory. Concave mirrors pivoted to align the directed energy laser on the target. Turbo-pumps howled at the rear of the plane and blasted a stream of hydrogen peroxide and iodine through metal nozzles, the fuel needed to power the enormous chemical oxygen laser designated COIL. Just as the *Musudan* missile began its initial boost, a million watts of lethal energy lanced out from the nose of the 747 and crossed the distance of a little over 500 kilometers at the speed of

light. They would paint the target with an invisible high energy beam that literally cooked the fuel in the first stage and the resulting increase in internal pressure caused it to explode. General Lane was going to notch his belt once again that morning, satisfied that he had put this upstart hothead Reed in his place once and for all.

"Now then," he leaned forward when the news of a successful kill came through, steepling his fingertips in satisfaction. "Let's get the B-2s up from Anderson and let the *WaveRiders* take out the rest of their launch facilities while we do the Chinese. Any objections?"

No one said anything.

Chapter 15

Captain Vladimir Karpov considered his tactical situation and the tentative contract he had negotiated with the Americans as he sat in the Captain's chair aboard *Kirov*. It wasn't signed yet, nothing more than a verbal agreement, a thin understanding he had negotiated with the commander of the nearest American Carrier Strike Group off the coast of Japan to the south. The Americans were justifiably edgy about the sortie of the entire Red Banner Pacific Fleet. So Karpov had decided to "pull a Volsky" and make direct radio contact with his adversary on CVBG Five. They had bandied about with boasts, insults, and veiled warnings to each other for some time, then got down to the subtle business at hand.

"You have your orders. I have mine." He had told the American Captain Tanner. "You're here to keep an eye on me. I'm here to keep an eye on you. It's that simple. We've been at it for eighty years, and this is no different. But things do tend to get a little out of hand when this much metal puts to sea."

The Americans wanted him to stay north of 43 degrees, which he was more than happy to do. At the same time he had advised Tanner that any hint of a strike package heading his way would be answered with missiles, a shoot first and ask questions later policy given the circumstances. The conversation had finished with that agreement in place, tentative as it was.

"I think we understand one another," Tanner had radioed. "You just remember those 43 degrees. Yes, I'll chase a few gulls down here. It's a favorite pastime for a carrier Captain. But I hear the birds up north are pretty sparse."

It was a subtle way of telling Karpov the Americans had no intention of pressing the issue. Both sides were clearly 'showing the flag' and the muscle behind it, but neither Captain wanted this to go any further than it had to.

"Haven't seen so much as a seagull this morning," Karpov replied. "And I have also heard the waters south of 43 degrees are a still polluted by that old reactor at Fukujima. Yes, Captain Tanner. I think we do understand one another. I suppose we can only hope that our respective governments can come to a similar understanding. Enjoy your coffee. Karpov out."

The problem was always those respective governments, thought Karpov. They were the old Greybacks who hovered over maps and projected their

greed and desire in thickly worded pronouncements. The United Nations was their forum and great theater in times of high crisis like this. The Chinese had stolen the show when one of their Generals stormed in and brazenly stated that a nuclear exchange was not only contemplated but apparently acceptable if the Americans wanted to try and stop them from forcibly integrating Taiwan with the mainland. His cold logic of war was as stark and simple as possible—you'll kill us, we'll kill you, and when the radiated dust settles we'll have survivors equivalent to your entire current population, and you will be gone. That was war's grizzly bottom line.

Karpov was doing the same math in his mind that day as he sized up the enemy carrier battlegroups heading his way, ticking off ship names, classes and capabilities in his mind, and working out his battle plan if it came to that. In the end one side or another would still have ships afloat and claim the victory, but the odds looked fairly steep for his Red Banner Pacific Fleet. CVBG *Washington* was enough to contend with, but he would soon be up against *two* American Carrier Strike Groups, as CVBG *Nimitz* was also heading west from Hawaii.

Nikolin interrupted his reverie with a communication from Naval Headquarters at Fokino. It was a plainly coded message, decrypted and printed on screen and teletype as it arrived, and it sent a rising pulse of adrenaline churning in Karpov's stomach when he read it: *SSN Tigr sunk by hostile action in the Gulf Of Mexico. PLAN forces have attacked Taiwan. Stand Ready. Hostilities imminent."*

Hostilities were already well underway, he thought. The Chinese… He shook his head. So it finally came down to missiles and manpower. That was sure to pull in the Americans and everyone else, present company included. Apparently there had also been a shooting incident off the US Coast. *Tigr* was an improved *Akula* class boat, and a good one. What was it doing in the Gulf of Mexico? That was one hell of a place to put on the patrol schedule given the present situation there. Then the other news concerning the hurricane and the major damage to the oil platforms began to filter through this latest comm-signal, and he wondered what had really happened in the oil dark waters of the Gulf.

Suppose our *Tigr* had something to do with the catastrophic collapse and sinking of that big British Petroleum platform? What would have possessed the Americans to simply fire on a Russian sub if it were not up to some very real mischief there in the Gulf Of Mexico?

The Greybacks, he thought. They pulled something out of their fedoras and this is what it came to in the end. *Tigr* was blown to pieces and sixty-five men were dead in the wreckage at the bottom of the sea.

"What are our friends doing on the *Washington*, Rodenko," he asked his radar man. The Americans were too far away to appear on the ship's organic radar systems, but Volsky had naval air assets up from Vladivostok, a pair of A-50U *Shmel* long range radar planes 300 kilometers south of his position in the border zone known as the AEW line. Both sides had Airborne Early Warning assets deployed there, and the Russian planes had company in the zone with an E-6 *Hawkeye* off the *Washington*, and a larger E-3 *Sentry* AWACS plane from airfields in Japan. Rodenko was also receiving satellite data from space where Russian spy birds watched with their high resolution cameras and infrared sensors.

"The American carrier is heating up, sir," said Rodenko. "I've seen this before. It looks like they're spotting for launch—at least two squadrons. If this is so I should have radar return feeds from the A-50s soon for confirmation."

Karpov expected this. Tanner would have to put something in the air. The only question was whether or not those planes would be chasing seagulls or Russian ships. "Is the battlegroup still heading north?"

"Yes, sir. They are about 200 kilometers south of the AEW line now, course 005 degrees. They can launch any time, and they're definitely spotting now."

Karpov did not like the sound of that. The American strike squadrons would have a combat radius of about 770 kilometers. Their standoff *Harpoons* could then fire at a range of 125 kilometers. They were already in strike range, some 600 kilometers to the south and his longest range cruise missile aboard *Kirov* was the P-900, which maxed out at 400 kilometers. He had two other fleet assets present with a longer reach. The *Varyag* was carrying the P-1000 *Vulkan* missile, built in the days when the design theory called for big missiles, with heavy warheads and long range. The newer inventory of supersonic missiles on *Kirov* today relied more on sheer speed and agility to defeat the enemy defenses, but Karpov now wished he had a big stick with a longer reach. *Varyag* was a powerful long range threat. The fleet carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* also carried eight P-700 *Shipwreck* missiles with a 625 kilometer range.

If he wanted to be able to begin offensive operations he had to do it with

those two ships or the limited strike wing aboard the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, or else take his surface action group south at high speed so *Kirov* could close the range. The two sides were closing on one another at about 25 to 30 knots each. This meant the range was diminishing by a hundred kilometers per hour. In another two hours he might get his flagship into missile range, but he had another option, though he was waiting on a signal from Fokino before he acted.

As for his adversary, the Americans had at least four strike squadrons on that carrier with at least twelve planes each. That could theoretically bring 48 planes with *Harpoon* anti-ship missiles, but the math wasn't that simple. In WWII each strike plane of the Japanese carriers had the simple job of carrying a single torpedo or one or two dumb bombs to the target. Everything was different in modern warfare, because defeating the enemy electronics suite was also a necessary part of the attack. If you could jam or suppress their radars you could then inhibit the otherwise fearsome SAM missile defense modern ships were capable of projecting. Karpov knew the American planes would be arrayed with a wide range of assigned duties if an attack came in, and he had studied the tactics well. Know thine enemy…

AWACS coverage would be provided by the carrier itself and land based assets already in place on the AEW line. Two groups of four fighters would be equipped for target combat air patrol, (TARCAP) and fighter escort duty. At least one or two planes would be standoff jammers flying the FA-18G Growler, and two F/A-18E/Fs would be equipped for mid air refueling operations. Two groups of 4 strike aircraft each would be equipped for SEAD duty, the Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses. These would carry HARM anti-radiation missiles to seek out the Russian radars and hopefully get some hits. These twenty planes were just the strike asset support group.

The meat of the package would come in three groups of four F/A-18's equipped for long range ASUW, Anti Surface Warfare duty. They would carry at least two 360 gallon external fuel tanks at this range and a weapons load out of 2 x AIM-9 *Sidewinders*, 2 x AIM-120s and 4 x AGM-84 *Harpoons*. It was these last twelve planes he really had to worry about, and the 48 *Harpoons* they were carrying. So the math produced the same sum, though it got there by a different method. It was a deadly dance in the skies that required careful choreography. The difficulty was in coordinating the time on target for the *Harpoons* to be within seconds of the HARM attack on the his radar sets. It would not be easy in the heat of combat.

Karpov thought back to those early days in the North Atlantic where the British carriers would throw groups to ten or twenty old by-plane *Swordfish* and *Fulmar* fighters at him, and then again to the more sophisticated attacks mounted by the Japanese with waves upwards of ninety planes sent in from a full carrier division. Those attacks seemed so primitive and foolhardy to him now, and it was only *Kirov's* dwindling SAM inventory that allowed any of those planes to have even the slightest chance of harming the Russian ship seriously.

The attack forming to his south, however, was another matter entirely, several orders of magnitude above the threat posed by Admiral Hara's brave Japanese pilots of WWII. That said, Karpov did not think it would be enough. The support group and strike assets in the attack he imagined would probably use three of the four squadrons on this American carrier. They would need to hold back that fourth squadron for defensive CAP over their task force and other contingencies. While a potent threat, the Captain did not think the Americans would seriously hurt his task force with this single carrier. If Captain Tanner was a wise man he would wait for the *Nimitz* group and then coordinate a joint attack, double or nothing.

He did not underestimate the skill of his opponent, but what Karpov did not know was that Tanner was now constrained by the urgency carried in that last FLASH emergency message traffic he had received. The American Captain had orders to find, attack and sink the battlecruiser *Kirov*, and another way to double down on his strike package bid that day. The *Nimitz* was coming for backup, but CVBG *Washington* was the cop on the beat at the moment, and if Tanner was ready to rumble he could strike at once.

This was the inherent advantage the Americans possessed, thought Karpov, the option of the first blow. Well I have some bad news for them. That option is mine as well. We have other assets in theater just for this contingency.

Rodenko soon reported planes in the air over the US carrier group, and trouble heading north with bad intent. Then came a sudden, distant rumble, a vibration in the air, and all Karpov could think about was that first deep vibrato when *Orel* blew up in the North Atlantic and sent them all careening through time to 1941. He could see the wide-eyed looks from Nikolin and Pavlov over on navigation with that same thought in mind as well, but Rodenko was quick with his report.

"It's that damn volcano again," he said coolly. "Another eruption, and it

looks like a big one this time."

Karpov took his field glasses and observed the distant outline of Iturup Island behind them where the volcano named "the Demon" was awakening. The thought he had about it earlier came to mind again, and his eyes narrowed with a demonic expression of his own. He grinned to recall how he had described himself as the devil to the American Captain. Perhaps there was some mischief in the air with this restless mountain behind him that he could use to good advantage.

"Rodenko, what's the prevailing wind direction right now?"

"Almost due south, sir."

* * *

Aboard CVBG *Washington* Captain Tanner had finished consultation with his CAG, the Carrier Air Group Commander, and was watching the last of the *Diamondbacks* take off to form up for the attack. The *Dambusters* were spotted and ready to join them in the number three hole. The *Royal Maces* were already aloft and he would hold his last squadron, the *Eagles* in the cleanup spot. Karpov's math was a little off that day. All SEAD and support craft aside, he had anticipated twelve strike planes with four harpoons each in the core attack, but there would be *twice* that number. Tanner had thirty-six planes between the three squadrons and he was using them all. And his support group was going to turn over all escort and TARCAP duty to some friends arriving from nearby airfields on Japan.

The 35th Fighter Wing with 13th and 14th Fighter Squadrons were operating out of Misawa AFB. The Wing's insignia was quite appropriate that day, a fist clutching a crimson dagger with the motto "Attack To Defend." The fighting 35th would stand in for the lack of a second carrier strike group, and both squadrons were on the tarmacs and ready for takeoff. The snarling black *Panthers* of the 13th Fighter Squadron were up first, quickly followed by the *Samurai Lightning* of the 14th Squadron. Both groups specialized in air superiority missions, and they would take that duty well in hand to allow Tanner to load out more of his *Superhornets* for the strike mission.

This would free up eight more planes for surface warfare strike load outs, and along with his reserve of four planes he was now going to have 24 FA-18 *Superhornets* up and angry instead of twelve. The 'bugs,' as they were called,

would be just a little thicker in the sky that morning. This would give him ninety-six harpoons in the strike, twice what Karpov expected.

The land based planes were F-16C *Fighting Falcons* that day, though the pilots had taken to calling their rides “Vipers” instead. The twelve planes of the 13th would take off after the Russian AEW assets, and then form up to accompany one arm of Tanner’s naval strike groups.

The *Samurai Lightning* of the 14th would stand an air superiority watch over Hokkaido in case the Russians threw anything at Tanner’s group from their airfields around Vladivostok. The Captain was watching the last of the *Dambusters* taxi and launch when he got the same news from his weather man that Karpov had just received.

“Looks like another eruption from that volcano up north, sir.” said Duffy. “That’s going to pile a ton of ash into the sky near the target zone, Captain.”

“Look, Cloud Man, why’d you have to go and spoil my lunch?”

“Sorry, sir. It’s the damn volcano.”

“Pyle!” The Captain wanted his communications officer.

“Sir?”

“You get on the radio and notify those strike groups. The weather up there is going to be a little smoky. They may have to divert to avoid that damn ash cloud.”

Tanner spelled out what he wanted, and he was about to make a big mistake. The strike package would split into two groups. The Alpha Group would fly northwest to link up with the land based fighters out of Misawa. This combined force would then make their attack by coming in just off the coast of Hokkaido and far enough west to avoid the ash, which would wreak havoc on the planes if they got caught in it. The Bravo Group would fly northeast then north to avoid the ash cloud as well, and come in from the wide Pacific. They would not have the benefit of the Falcon fighter escort, but the planes designated for SEAD attacks would fire and then quickly assume an air defense role.

There was going to be more in the sky than smoke and ash that day, and Tanner was satisfied his little pincer attack would catch the Russians napping. He was confident that he had the matter well in hand, but he had not yet taken the full measure of his opponent, and Karpov had ideas of his own that were soon to make it a bloody day for all concerned.

“Their strike package is splitting up,” said Rodenko. “Looks like they’re diverting some planes over Hokkaido and a second group well east over the

Pacific."

"Excellent!" Karpov saw an advantage here. "Contact *Admiral Kuznetsov*. Tell them I want everything they can fly heading east. They'll provide a strong fighter screen there. As for the group over Hokkaido, let's say hello with our new S-400s."

It was going to be a wild hour at the edge of a great firestorm, though no one realized just how bad it would be.

Part VI

Big Bad Humm

“Marines are landing
jolly joe jughead
my that’s fine
sandalwood khakis
ho by dynamo
big bad humm.”

From: *Invasion Jazz*
By Richard Gylgayton

Chapter 16

It started like any normal day in the Gulf. Shipping traffic was getting underway after a long night taking on a wide range of crude and distilled oil and gas. *Princess Royal* was only one of a number of very large tankers scheduled to transit the straits of Hormuz. Already bloated with Kuwaiti crude, Fairchild & Company had a lot riding on her safe return. Exercising a futures contract written when crude was still well below $100 per barrel, Elena Fairchild had managed to fill her largest fleet tanker for just $70 US per barrel. The price had already doubled in the 6 months since she signed the contract, committing a major share of the company's remaining operating capital to the deal.

The Captain of *Princess Royal* was very edgy that day. When the company owner and CEO interrupts a business dinner to make an emergency radio call to your ship, you listen very intently. *Princess Royal* was to be put on full alert, its modest crew to be on watch for any close approach of light craft. All four 50 caliber machine guns were to be deployed on deck, with orders to shoot first and ask questions later should any craft get within 500 yards of the giant tanker. The Captain was to launch his motorized cutter and sail it half a kilometer in front of the vessel at all times, with a party of seamen scouring all points of the compass, with particular attention to anything seen floating in the water.

They were obviously worried about mines, thought the Captain, but had little understanding of how they really worked. He had no doubt that the Iranians had rocket assisted mines on the floor of the Gulf even now, and these could be triggered by the passing of a massively hulled ship like *Princess Royal.* They could come rocketing up from the sea floor at any time.

In spite of the hair raised by such a call, the morning voyage had been thankfully uneventful. *Princess Royal* had passed Abu Musa half an hour ago, a small arrowhead shaped Gulf island that had been disputed by Iran and the UAE for some years. Iran had settled the matter by simply occupying the island, along with two other little rocks north of it, Tunb as Sugrah and Tunb al Kubra. The three sat astride, or flanked, the main deep water shipping lane of the Gulf, waters the *Princess Royal* had to navigate as she steamed for home. Now she was just at the technical maritime boundary between Iran and

Oman, on her last leg up towards the Musandam Peninsula where she would enter the southernmost shipping lane and make her dog-leg right turn around the peninsula, officially entering the Straits of Hormuz.

* * *

Abu Musa was a barren little island, with a small harbor at its western end, served by a sandbar quay. Seven small craft had been berthed there when *Princess Royal* made her closest approach to the Island. Six were there now. A single paved road circled the small island, which was bisected by a single runway air strip that extended all the way across from the western harbor to the east shore. Colonel Andar, the Island's military commandant, was not at his desk this morning either. He had taken to his armored SUV half an hour earlier, heading for the east coast.

A bit behind schedule, and with no air traffic due to land for hours, Andar decided to simply drive down the long concrete air strip rather than taking the longer coastal road. He had just arrived at the far end of the strip, ending just yards from the eastern shore of the island, and was sitting in his vehicle listening to Radio Teheran while he watched the sumptuous rear end of the British flagged *Princess Royal* through his binoculars as she headed into her turn in the distance.

He checked his watch, knowing the seventh patrol boat would be coming round the sharp southeastern tip of the island at any moment. Officially he no longer commanded seven patrol boats. One had been sent home to the Iranian mainland three days ago for scheduled maintenance, or so the files would read now. Officially, this boat was never even in his harbor, and the fuel and munitions she loaded the previous evening were never in his inventory bunkers as well. It was amazing how unknowing and oblivious the government could be, he thought with a wry smile.

He was here to witness the event that would change the world in a way that few could imagine just now. 9/11 had been called a day that changed everything. The anniversary of that event had just passed uneventfully, with nary a word from Osama bin Ladin. His second in command, Zawahiri, had chided the Islamic fighters the world over for not striking harder against the infidel occupiers. He had claimed they were in league with the devil Americans now, fearful of Iran as well. They *should* be fearful, Andar thought. And the Americans should be fearful as well. They had the

impudence to threaten Iran, and lecture her as to what she might or might not do. Their lap dog Israel was always yammering, straining at the leash.

The operation today had been carefully planned. The American carrier group, headed by CV *Reagan* had steamed into the North Arabian Sea on the final leg of her six month tour some days ago. The rotation cycle saw her relieve the *Eisenhower* there, which was already well across the Indian ocean, sailing for the troubled waters of the Pacific. *Reagan* was now standing its maritime security watch, which had been heated up on schedule to draw American interest there. Fighters in Iraq had been ordered to stir up trouble for the very same reason. Teheran had dictated the pace of activity and the theatre was brought to a high boil. *Reagan* would stay in the Arabian Sea and be unable to move east if needed there. It was all planned.

He smiled as the patrol craft, of which he knew nothing officially, came into sight on schedule to his right. It was making a gradual approach to the lumbering supertanker, soon to cross the fading remnant of its wake, but never to get close enough to raise any alarm.

The Americans and the British—meddlers, thieves, bullies, brigands—would soon see what their adventurism may cost them. The *Princess Royal* was about to have a few problems.

* * *

On the bridge of *Aegean Reliance,* a Greek flagged 40,000 ton container ship moving up the Gulf, the Watch Commander leaned forward of the wheel to make certain his eyes had not deceived him. His jaw hung open in disbelief. The Duty Officer had just reported a fireball where the tanker *Princess Royal* was making its hard right into the shipping channel in the straits.

“What happened? Did you see what I think I saw?”

The duty officer pointed to the video imaging system, recording the forward arc of the ship as it navigated the constricted waters. It was a protocol now required by the tanker insurance industry, as a way of documenting any potential collision at sea.

“Activate camera two and then play number one back again!” The Watch Commander wanted to be absolutely convinced before he took any action, but the playback did nothing to ease the sickly feeling in his gut. He saw the streaking shadow lance at the heart of *Princess Royal* and watched the

fireball envelop the vessel amidships, expanding out in a massive explosion. The Watch Commander rubbed that spot on his left elbow that always started to throb when the world went topsy-turvy on him.

"Signal the Director's Office," he said slowly. "Tell him we think the *Princess Royal* has had some kind of accident. No…tell them we think she was deliberately attacked. Indications are there was a major explosion aboard, but we think she was struck by a missile."

He was reaching for his field glasses, eyes scanning the dark waters for any sign of a small craft. He thought he spied something in the water, but then it was gone. Then he turned to focus on the burning tanker ahead. The fire was bad and he had to see about rendering assistance.

"Traffic control!"

"Sir?"

"Anything ready for immediate launch?"

"We have one cutter ready on 15 minute notice sir. "

"Notify the Captain. We may be involved in rescue operations. Helmsman!"

"Aye?"

"Slow to 5 knots." With a sinking feeling he realized he wasn't going to follow *Princess Royal* into the straits any time soon. He would need security on deck at once, and a quick course plot to the nearest port, most likely Port Rashid at Dubai. They had shut down most commercial traffic there in March to favor newer facilities at Jebel Ali, but the port was still there, damn it, and this was going to be an emergency situation.

Who had fired the missile? Was his ship next? But for now, the law of the sea tugged at him. He would see what he might do to help the stricken ship ahead, but his decks were stacked high with over a hundred steel shipping containers, and the safety of this vessel would have to come first. *Princess Royal* was on fire and blocking the channel ahead. If she sunk the channel would be closed indefinitely. He would need an emergency berthing at a local port, and that quickly.

"Order the lighter to be ready to make way. Mission is search and rescue —Full medical team! I want complete video documentation on this console from now on. No tape rotation. You save every inch of footage. Understood?"

"Aye, aye, sir." The Duty Officer fed the orders down to the Launch Bay. Then the Watch Officer reached for the handset to call the Captain. All their

lives were about to become very complicated.

* * *

Arkansas Anchorage, was established 80 miles from Dubai in the Persian Gulf to support US military operations in the region. It was home to ASPRON-4, the Military Sealift Command's fourth “Afloat Prepositioning Ship Squadron Four,” though officially she did not exist either. The squadron was de-listed from the service rolls once the major movement of equipment to the Gulf had been officially completed. Unofficially, she still had a number of vessels at anchor, for contingencies that came up more often than bad weather in the volatile Persian Gulf. And with the *Ronald Reagan* group on the other side of the Straits of Hormuz, in the North Arabian Sea, ASPRON-4 was one of the few remaining navy units still available to quickly respond to the theater commander once reactivated. This was not a combat outfit, but the unit had four large, medium-speed, roll-on/roll-off ships, each one packed to the gills with pre-positioned military equipment, munitions and supplies for the US Marines.

They were going to be needing them soon.

Al Dhafra Air Base, located about an hour outside of Abu Dhabi, was one of the first US facilities to receive word on the incident involving *Princess Royal.* It had been home to the Air Force's 763rd Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron in support of Operation Southern Watch during the pre-war years of containment for Saddam. At that time it used U-2s and Global Hawk spy planes to keep an eye on the Iraqis. Now, ten years later, nearly 300 US personnel were still deployed at Al Dhafra facility, though she had no teeth.

For that the ball was quickly passed to Balad airfield in Iraq, where the flight controller inside “Kingpin,” the base control tower, was monitoring aircraft in flight over the battlespace at that very moment. The base had seen a quiet ‘surge’ of its own in recent months in a special agreement signed with Iraq. The big B-1s had returned, as well as fresh squadrons of F-16C fighters, the advanced ‘Block 50’ version, equipped with a high-tech cockpit helmet allowing the pilot to aim and fire his weapons at a target with a simple head movement. The base had also doubled its ISR component in the last two months, an acronym that stood for Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance.

When the word came in that a tanker was on fire in the Straits of Hormuz,

Balad went to red alert at once. The Air Force would be calling on all these services, and then some, in a matter of minutes. The Kingpin tower commander immediately diverted a pair of F-16s to overfly the scene, and a Global Hawk was on the tarmac in ten minutes, ready to take a high resolution look at anything happening in the vicinity of the incident.

Further east, at the main port of Jebel Ali, the light helo carrier *Iwo Jima* was already slipping her moorings and getting ready to put to sea. Aboard were elements of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, with ten helicopters of varying types along with a squadron of five AV-8 Harrier type jump jets. The Marines had everything they would need to perform their signature mission —take and hold enemy ground by amphibious assault. And if anything was lacking, or needed by way of replenishment, ASPRON-4 would serve it up on a platter when the leathernecks called.

The Americans were quick to react to the situation. Carrier Strike Group *Ronald Reagan* was already alerted to the trouble, and the Navy was revving up operations in the Arabian Sea. First and foremost on their minds was the safety of other shipping now using the Straits of Hormuz. If this was a terrorist attack, aimed at shutting down the vital channel, the US Navy was well equipped to respond. The guided-missile cruiser USS *Chancellorsville*, and destroyer USS *Gridley* were steaming in the van and ordered to the Straits at once. Additional support was nearby. The USS *Ardent*, an avenger-class Mine Countermeasure Ship, would accompany the two fighting ships into the narrow waters. Planes and helos from the big carrier provided a thick top cover for the operation.

The situation was quickly confirmed as a deliberate attack. Already major media stations like CNN had picked up Al Jazirrah video feeds of the wounded *Princess Royal* , which was now breaking news. The question that hung in the air like the darkened pall of thick black smoke over the stricken tanker, was whether or not she was in any danger of sinking, and thus blocking the channel. She was not, but that information was known only to Fairchild & Company personnel at the moment.

The navy acted as though the viability of the shipping channel was under immediate threat. They called Port Fujairah in the UAE for quick tug support when reconnaissance indicated the ship was in no immediate danger of sinking. Intel had a line on a patrol boat that had been picked up by cameras on a container ship following some ways behind *Princess Royal* when she was attacked.

US Intelligence was quick to put two and two together. They scoured satellite imagery on the Gulf Islands they had been monitoring for some time. Last week's archive showed seven boats in the harbor on Iranian occupied Abu Musa, the island closest to the point of the attack. Photo specialists at Navy Intel were quick to match the satellite imagery with the video footage obtained from the container ship. They had found their smoking gun.

The information was routed directly to the office of the Vice President, and then on to the White House. The briefing to the President would indicate, with a high reliability, that this was a deliberate, and state sponsored attack on a British registered oil tanker, and no mere incident of simple terrorism, particularly in light of the current geopolitical tensions. Within minutes, US forces in the Persian Gulf were brought to an elevated state of readiness, and the phone was ringing in the quay bunker at ASPRON-4.

As the Fairchild ship was a British registered vessel, HMS *Iron Duke,* a Type 23 frigate, was immediately ordered to assist other Fairchild operations ongoing in the Med. Britain was covering all her bets, particularly those involving the conveyance of much needed oil supplies as the country prepared to go to a full wartime footing. The *Iron Duke* was happily en-route to the Eastern Med at the time, sailing to rejoin the US *Roosevelt* battlegroup. She had participated in "Operation Firestone," a naval exercise held off the Carolina coast a month ago, sailed home briefly, and then put out to sea again with a new commanding officer, Captain Ian Williams. When word came in that he was to sail immediately for the Bosporus, he was quite surprised.

With all this hubbub in the Persian Gulf why are we being sent up to the Bosporus? Are the Russians planning to sortie with something? Then he received further orders: rendezvous with a small flotilla of oil tankers led by the corporate maritime security ship *Argos Fire* and provide additional escort through the Black Sea to terminal ports at or near Supsa. He turned to his executive officer still dumbfounded by the message.

"Well here's a private little nightmare," he said quietly, with endemic British calm. He handed the message to his XO. Lt. Commander Colin Firth, who read it quietly, one raised eyebrow his only immediate reaction. Then he turned to the Captain, a look of concern on his face.

"We'll be the only Western shipping in a sea of red in short order, sir. Care to wonder what the Russians will do when we poke our nose into the Black Sea? It's not hot with us and them just yet, but it will likely be so very soon."

“Quite so,” said Williams, drawing on the pipe that seemed glued to his right hand, particularly when he was on the bridge. The service frowned on the behavior, but a Captain at sea on his own ship was a bit of a demigod, and no one would presume to even take notice, let alone be bothered by Williams’ addiction to aromatic tobacco. He was a bit of a purist, and smoked only one brand, Gawith & Hoggarth *Top Black Cherry,* a Kendal style blend made from a 200-year old recipe dating from the days where British purity law dictated that only certain natural ingredients could be used in pipe tobacco. The crew had taken to calling the bridge “Cherry Estates,” and it was always easy to know just where the Captain was on the ship, surrounded as he was by a thin veil of sweet, aromatic smoke.

“Well, we won’t be alone, XO,” Williams put in. “That ship noted in the dispatch there will make for some interesting company.”

“Argos Fire, sir? I can’t say as I’m familiar with it.”

“You’ll think otherwise when you lay eyes on her,” Williams said with a smile. “It’s a Type 45. This Fairchild & Company bought the damn thing lock, stock and barrel some years back and ran her through BAE Systems in Portsmouth for a good overhaul.”

“HMS *Dauntless*, sir! I remember now. Well that will take the sting off this assignment, unless they’ve made her into a corporate yacht.”

“Oh I’ve heard a bit about this ship, Mister Firth, and it has all the bells and whistles, and good teeth as well.”

Events were now taking on a momentum of their own, and intelligence chatter began to burn up the airways. If the Americans wanted a pretext for another swipe at Iran, the attack on *Princess Royal* had given it to them. For years there had been talk of a planned attack to impede Iran’s nuclear ambitions, yet nothing ever materialized.

Israel’s request for a thousand more GBU-39 bunker busters had finally been approved and put on the fast track, but the Pentagon would have to move heaven and earth to get them delivered. Russia quickly countered by announcing the sale of their advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile system, a fearsome deterrent, even for the capable air forces of Israel and the US. All along the US eastern seaboard the Navy was thrumming with activity, and this very same day the Russians decided to send the US yet another message by ordering one of their newest *Borei* class nuclear ballistic missile subs out for test firing in the North Atlantic. There were too many military assets, on all sides, standing on their toes and looking for a brawl. The attack on

Princess Royal had set more in motion than anyone realized at the time, even the company senior executives on board the *Argos Fire* in the Aegean.

It was the worst possible time for military trouble, given the fragile state of affairs in the West. That same afternoon, while *Princess Royal* burned in the Straits of Hormuz, oil futures began to spike up in an unusual trading session that should have never been called by the Boyz on Wall Street. They were just trying to apply the most basic rule of plunder when it comes to financial dealings – cover your ass. But when bad news hit the trading pits, bad things could happen very quickly.

Chapter 17

"How could we have missed this?" said Elena Fairchild in an exasperated tone. "How?" She looked squarely at her intelligence chief, Mack Morgan, who had been called on the carpet to answer for the lapse. They were in the executive offices on the ship, and Captain MacRae stood by Morgan's side, hat in hand, hoping to lend his mate a little moral support.

Out in the Aegean, the Fairchild flagship *Argos Fire* was leading her small flotilla through the long channel of the Bosporus along the planned route to the Black Sea. The frigate *Iron Duke* had caught up with the flotilla, and she was a welcome sight. Elena Fairchild had a little pull with the government, and she had made a few phone calls to make the arrangement earlier. The frigate now led the way, with *Princess Irene* next in line and then the two larger tankers followed by *Argos Fire*. They would enter the Black sea that night, a worrisome prospect given the rising tensions. Now, however, Elena Fairchild's mind was beset by the news in the Persian Gulf and the fate of *Princess Royal.*

"Salase only told us half the truth," said MacRae. "He floated that malarkey about a mine, but from the angle on that damage the attack was made by a missile, and it was fired from a position well *behind* the ship."

"We had the report, m'lady," said Morgan sheepishly, "but there were no details; no confirmation. His heavy dark brows were lowered with concern and just the right amount of regret played over his dark eyes. "Salase had us watching our nose with that hint about the mines, then someone gave it to us in the ass, eh?"

"What Mack says is true, m'lady," MacRae spoke up. "I stopped by the radio room to check on black channel traffic right before the dinner. We had a message on the BTC pipeline trouble, and a nebulous warning of mines in the Persian Gulf. I had the damn message in my pocket during dinner, but never got the chance to pull you aside."

"Salase knew more than he was delivering," said Fairchild. "I'll have that fat pig on a spit the next time I see him." Elena was furious. "What do you think he really knew?"

"Hard to say," said MacRae. "It was clear he wanted to warn us of the

attack. He could have kept his mouth shut, you know."

"I don't think he was doing me any great favor," said Elena. "He threw that bone on the table just to shake things up and close the deal the other night. The fat little bastard was laughing at me behind those bulging eyes of his all evening. We've got five dead and one missing on the *Princess Royal.* Damn, we're getting very sloppy." She was pacing nervously, agitated by the bad news and a long, sleepless night.

"Well, it could have been worse," said MacRae. "A mine, I mean. This was a missile, and at least she was struck well above the water line. There's no danger of her sinking, and from the looks of this video," he gestured at the monitor on Fairchild's desk, "only the center compartment seems to be involved."

"God," Elena breathed. "I can't lose that ship. That's twenty percent of her cargo on fire. What if the rest goes up? We'd be ruined! We won't be able to deliver the oil to Chevron as agreed."

"We've got to get *Princess Royal* out of the straits," MacRae said, in a calm voice. "We can move her to Al Fujairah on the coast of the UAE. It's one of the largest bunkerages in the world now, bigger than Singapore. And just our luck, they can handle ships in this class."

"What about the report of engine damage?"

"Some flooding affected the engine room, but she can be towed," the captain reassured her. "This is all theater. If they wanted to sink her they would have hit her closer to the water line, or used a mine to gut her hull below the water line. This was just a gun and run media show. The real damage is there, right on CNN. Do you have any idea what this will do to oil futures and tanker insurance rates? With everything shut down in the Gulf of Mexico, the price of crude is going to double very soon, mark my words."

That was the first thing he had said that gave her any solace. Fairchild composed herself, her eyes tightening with sudden resolve.

"Do you think we were deliberately targeted—by our rivals, I mean?" She looked at her intelligence chief now.

Morgan ran a hand through his thick, dark hair and breathed heavily, thinking for a moment. "No," he began. "No, I don't think so. And I doubt Salase knew anything more than he revealed at that contract dinner, from what I've heard of it. Oh, he got wind of the attack, and he knew he couldn't come to the meeting without revealing it, but he didn't have the details either. His network wasn't that good."

“Better than *our* information,” Elena fumed.

“We had it, just as the Captain says,” Morgan countered. “Had it in our pocket the whole time.”

“Not soon, enough,” she said quickly. “You slipped up on this one, Mack. We should have had it days before.”

“I’ll not argue that, m’lady. But now it’s done and we’ve got to consider the advantages in the situation.”

She bit her lower lip, her mind racing. “You think they can get the ship to Al Fujairah, Captain?”

“It’s just 30 miles south, the only port that could handle *Princess Royal*. If this is an isolated attack, as I think it is, she’ll make it with no problems. I got a hold of Volker there. They have a couple of KC-air tankers they can rig for fire-fighting. Their engineer thinks we can get retardant on the fire and contain the damage—but it’s likely we’ll lose everything in the central fuel bunker.”

“Even so, if we save the rest we still come out ahead. We’ll have 80% of our cargo, but it will be worth twice as much as we thought.” She was shaken with sudden energy, moving quickly to her desk computer to pull up her operators file. Her hands moved quickly over the keyboard, the Claddagh ring catching a gleam of light as she typed.

“Hello…” she said, noting a priority alert on the intelligence channel of her screen. With their feet to the fire over the missed threat to *Princess Royal*, her spooks had been very keen to make up for lost ground, and regain some face. “Well, what have we here?” She waved MacRae and Morgan over to have a look at her screen.

“Thunder Horse down?” he gave her an unknowing look.

“Radio intercept,” she said, eyes alight. “It’s a big BP platform in the Gulf of Mexico. I’d say they have some significant damage out there if a platform of that size is having trouble.” She tightened her lips, deciding something, then started typing.

“That hit CNN this morning,” said Morgan, “but I can tell you what won’t be on the news about it, and that what’s most likely in that intelligence report.”

“Trying to cover your backside, Mack?” she prodded him, still perturbed but willing to forgive. “Alright, let’s have it.”

“Word is that that damage to *Thunder Horse* was not all from the hurricane. The Yanks took down a Russian sub in the Gulf of Mexico just last

night. *Akula* class attack boat. They think the damn thing put a torpedo right into the rig."

She raised her eyebrows at that, as did MacRae. It would have been a very bold move, and a strong escalation in the rising tension between East and West.

"Yanks are mad as a hornet about this one. Someone in DC wants red blood, now, if you know what I mean m'lady."

"I think I do, Mack. Keep an ear on it for me and let me know the moment you have anything else."

"Of course. The question is, what will the Americans do?"

Elena looked up at MacRae, her mind working hard. "The gloves are coming off, gentlemen," she said quietly. The Russians traded a very expensive submarine for an even more expensive oil drilling platform just now. They're letting us know they can hit the oil, and hit it hard. You know what that might mean for our little jaunt into the Black Sea. Thank God we managed to bring in a little more help with the *Iron Duke*, but I'll want the *Argos Fire* trimmed for action the instant we pass the Bosporus.

"She'll be ready, m'lady."

"We need to get hold of the Van Ommeren group now. They're the main player for tank terminal operations in the UAE—and call Vopak too."

"The Dutch again," said MacRae, hand on his chin. "I think we may have a play here, Elena."

"Mississippi Region?" she asked.

"No. First here, in the *Caspian* region."

She looked up at him, nodding her head in agreement.

MacRae smiled. "Caspian bandits are shooting up Royal Dutch Shell operations in the region over here, and someone is taking pot-shots at our traffic in the Persian Gulf."

"While BP, and god knows how many other producers, have big headaches in the Gulf of Mexico."

"Yes. Now we're four days at full speed from being able to do *Princess Royal* any good. But we could offer Royal Dutch Shell a helping hand with their Caspian Region operations. We already have the Chevron contract in hand, but I doubt they'll be able to bunker two and a half million barrels in Baku. Perhaps Royal Dutch Shell might need a lift for some of their oil in the Supsa terminal. We can split our three tankers between Chevron and Shell. I smell another arrangement."

“My thoughts exactly,” said Elena. “Assuming Vopak and Van Ommeren can save that oil on *Princess Royal* and bunker it at Al Fujairah. Once Chevron takes possession they may have second thoughts about shipping it to Singapore, particularly after this news in the Gulf of Mexico.”

MacRae smiled. “We couldn’t have planned it better! But what about the Salase deal and Singapore? He’ll lose his brokerage commission.”

“Fuck Salase,” Elena put a fine point on it. “That’s what he was trying to do to me, wasn’t it?”

“He wouldn’t get to first base,” said MacRae, pleased by the warmth of her smile in return.

Morgan noticed the familiarity between them, but pretended not to. He knew that MacRae was fairly close to the CEO, and was grateful for his presence here to take a few arrows for the intelligence lapse. Fairchild was correct. He should have had it—had it all, hook, line and sinker, cut and trimmed in a pan with hot oil, salt and a patty of butter. That was the way Fairchild was accustomed to being served up her intelligence, and he made a mental note to brush up on his cooking skills. He already had men working on the situation they would most likely face in the Black Sea, and was ready with that initial report if needed.

“In fact,” Elena’s eyes leapt ahead to light on some distant thought. “We might even twist this arrangement into a nice new pretzel.”

MacRae was nodding yes.

“Salase has brokered a deal with the Americans to move oil east for the Japanese—and I was to carry it for him, all the way from the Black Sea to Singapore. But if I get my oil, whatever’s left of it on *Princess Royal*, and bunker it in Al Fujairah, it would be so much closer to Singapore, wouldn’t it?”

“So we make a trade?”

“Exactly—barrel for barrel, just as I suggested to Salase. It would be as if we moved the Black Sea oil round the Cape without even sailing!”

“Lovely,” said MacRae. “And when our three little ladies are all loaded up here with the oil from Chevron and Shell?”

“It becomes ours in trade, and we ship it to the states. They’ll be desperate for fresh deliveries. I can have five buyers in an hour. Oil inventories were down to a 21 day supply after Hurricane Ernesto, for God’s sake. Now this Hurricane Victor is going to shut down refineries for at least another two weeks. They’ll be spot shortages cropping up already. We’ll make a killing,

and we don't have to go to Singapore to collect. They can take my cargo on *Princess Royal* in trade and we'll find someone willing to ship it to Singapore in short order. There must be three or four carriers in Al Fujairah we could subcontract."

The Captain was suddenly relieved. "The thing now is to get *Argos Fire* and our three princesses out to those Black Sea terminals at all speed. From there we should be close enough to launch helos that could make it in to the Caspian, and we could even pick up a little security money from Chevron and Shell in the bargain. Remember that call for mercs? We have some fellows aboard who are fairly handy with automatic weapons."

"My fifty Argonauts."

"Exactly. And with four X-3 Helos to move them. With your permission, Madame, I'll get the men ready for a mission or two."

The Argonauts were the fifty man security contingent on board the *Argos Fire*, a highly trained commando that would be perfect for the job. The four X-3s were a nice trump card in a situation like this, fast, deadly, and with good range.

"That's four hundred miles to Baku," Morgan warned, "and another 256 up to Fort Shevchenko where this Chevron Platform is located. You'll get there, but then what? The fuel tanks will be dry as a bone."

"We can refuel at Baku in both directions," said MacRae. "BP has an operations center there and I think they'd support us."

"They will indeed," said Fairchild. "But I want this done right. Make sure you dole out plenty of ammunition," she quipped. After all, boys will be boys."

He offered a winsome salute and turned for the bridge. Morgan started to follow him, but stopped short of the door when she called his name.

"Mister Morgan," she said calmly.

"I know I dropped the ball," he began, but she quickly waved that away.

"Forget that, Mack. But just so you know, Salase threw the damn thing on the dinner table like a cold wet mackerel. Caught me completely by surprise. Don't let it happen again."

Morgan nodded gravely.

"Now what am I going to be facing in the Black Sea?"

"Well to put it plainly, Madame, the Russians. The fleet there isn't what it used to be, particularly after the partition with Ukraine. The *Moskva* was the flagship, but being the lead ship in its class they renamed it *Slava* and sent it

to the Northern Fleet two years ago. They filled the void with three smaller frigates, *Grigorovich, Essen* and *Makarov*. Good missiles on all three, the P-800 *Onyx/Yakhont* and the P-900 *Kalibr* cruise missile. NATO calls it the *Sizzler*. After that they don't have much else of a threat. They decommissioned the *Kerch*, though it's still in mothballs at Novorossiysk. They've also managed to keep one old *Kashin* class destroyer afloat commissioned in 1969, but barely. It spends most of its time in port or dry dock. They'll have two old *Krivak* class frigates, and two diesel subs. The rest are coastal corvettes, and I assume we'll be hugging the Turkish coast so I doubt they could put in an appearance there."

"Can we handle them, Mack?" That was all she really wanted to know. "Am I flushing half my company down the tubes here while I watch the other half burn in the Straits of Hormuz?"

"Oh, with *Iron Duke* along we'll handle the Black Sea Fleet, m'lady. But the Russian air force is another matter. You'll be at risk in another four hours. We have a good air defense missile umbrella, one of the best in the world for that matter, but we'll have no air cover to speak of, unless we can get Turkish support. If the Russians get serious about it they can give us something to shoot at. Our Sampson radar can track a cricket ball flying at Mach 3 and our *Sea Vipers* are as good as they come. That said, they only need one hit on a tanker to cause serious pain—as we've seen with *Princess Royal* in the Gulf."

"Very well… Keep your ear to the ground on this for me. I want to know what they tee up before it gets airborne."

"The Chinese have been taking pot-shots at American satellites, but as far as I know they haven't hit anything belonging to the Crown yet. I'll see if I can have them keep a good eye out for us, Madame."

"I'll sleep easier, Mack. Thanks."

Morgan saluted, and made a graceful withdrawal, glad he had not been grilled and fried like the fish he was supposed to have served. That bit about the cold mackerel made the point well enough for him. He couldn't let the company down again.

Chapter 18

The commander of Iran's aerial defense, Brigadier General Ahmed Mighani was not happy. He had been reading all morning, digesting news feeds and official government statements on the ever boiling kettle of the Gulf. The latest was the typical fare, half taunting and half bravado, with a swipe at Israel in the mix: *"The Zionist regime lacks the diplomatic, economic and social capability to launch a wide-scale war," General Yahya Rahim Safavi said in response to threats by Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. "Iran's armed forces, including the Revolutionary Guards, and 11 million members of the Basiji, the Guards voluntary force, "are fully prepared to deal with any attack."*

Yes, he thought. So prepared that I can barely fly half the planes we have in inventory, and have to scavenge equipment that should have been retired twenty years ago. This was followed by a story claiming the US planned to use Georgian military facilities as a beachhead to strike Iran. And at this very moment the *Pathfinder*, an oceanographic survey ship owned by the US Military Sealift Command, was making its second visit to the Black Sea in the last ten days. The official purpose of the visit was to conduct an underwater survey to ostensibly look for the wreckage of the *Armenia*, a WWII era Soviet hospital ship sunk by the Germans. Needless to say, that mission was now cancelled.

The curiosity of the Americans knows no bounds, he thought, fully aware that this ship could also monitor Russian submarine activity in the Black Sea at a range out to 60 miles. He continued reading: "*With regard to the United States, Safavi said military assets in the region were deployed in such a way that they actually posed a serious danger to the U.S. itself."*

General Mighani wondered what that was supposed to mean, concluding that all the American assets would, of course, make wonderful targets for Iran's Shahab IIIs, the medium range ballistic missiles that were the backbone of the country's real deterrent against any possible attack. The government release continued it's confident line: *"There is no doubt that the Americans, who are still meddling in the Pacific, will not open a second front with a major war in the Middle East," he said, referring to a possible attack on Iran."*

No doubt, no doubt. That was why the nation was busy this morning conducting an emergency preparedness drill over the next three days. No doubt…

But the cable that had darkened his mood had come suddenly, interrupting his review of the National Air Defense drill. The news about the attack on a British flagged tanker was cause for both elation and regret. It was a dangerous situation that could easily cause him great grief. The British tanker was struck amidships as she entered the Straits of Hormuz. The attack delivered a sharp rebuke to those who have plundered the region for decades, he thought. It also made the obvious point that the oil the West so desperately needed could be choked off at a moment's notice. But the danger that this attack would be blamed on Iran was very real.

At the moment he had no hard information as to who the perpetrators might be, and did not know the incident had been carefully planned. Special Operations had not bothered to consult with the Air Force for security purposes. He was only told to conduct these silly exercises, but with live ammo load outs.

There was other news as well. An attack on the US embassy in Yemen, beginning with a suicide bomb and followed up by an attempt to storm the embassy in San'ai, had also just crossed the wires. The attacked failed. Good coffee in San'ai, he thought, but bad politics. Could this be part of a new wave of jihadi attacks? It was clear that the Americans would look first to Iran for any potential involvement. He knew the incident would offer them just the pretext they needed to make good their longstanding threats. Already the American light carrier *Iwo Jima* had put to sea from its berthing at Jebel Ali, and there were alarming signs of increased US naval activity building in the region.

In an official statement to the Iranian press, for general release, he made it clear that Iran would be ready, sounding just like all the other official statements he had been reading that morning. "If Iran is attacked, it will deliver a crushing blow to the enemy…we will surprise the enemy and make them regret their actions." And now he was sorting through his surprises, realizing that, when it came to fixed wing aircraft in defense of the homeland, he had very little in inventory.

The aging Iranian air force was still holding on to retired legacy systems inherited from the days of the Shah. He had all of 65 F-4 Phantom fighters, and some 60 F-5E Tigers, though he knew the air force would be lucky to get

even half of these in the air and keep them there for longer than a few days. Of the 25 old F-14 Tomcats, perhaps 6 were mission capable. Officially he also had 25 more advanced Russian Mig-29s in inventory, but he knew many of these were mere trainers. The one plane he had any faith in, perhaps good for one desperate strike at a given target, would be his strike group of a dozen Sukhoi-25s and the 30 Sukhoi-24s behind them. Half of these had been a surprise gift from Saddam, fleeing to Iran during the first Gulf War. He knew his planes were no match for the superior American made inventories that they would have to face, but some would reach their targets. The rest of his air force was comprised of a few old Chinese J-7 fighters and a couple dozen French made Mirage F-1s, both planes dating to the old cold war era of the mid 1970s.

The only thing he could do with such a force was simply throw it into the wind and hope for the best. The American F-16 and F-15 fighters would destroy the bulk of his force in a matter of hours, not to mention the lethal F-22 Raptors, a new stealth fighter that could not even be seen on the old radars his planes mounted. His only hope was that some of his planes would pose a distraction, while perhaps a few others would manage to unleash a few missiles. Yes, it was in his missile inventories that all hope resided now. He had enough to unleash a storm on the Gulf, and make life there very miserable for a few weeks, perhaps a month at most. The air force would simply buy him a few precious hours time so his liquid and solid fueled missiles could be staged and targeted on key installations in the region that the Americans depended on for their life blood of oil.

The strategy, of course, was not to concentrate his force on American military assets. Oh, he would use the new Russian missiles to threaten the American carriers, but otherwise engaging the U.S, military was fruitless. No, instead he would fling his arsenal of Shehabs at the major oil terminals on the oil rich states to the south. He would strike at America by cutting off the flow of her precious oil business. There was no other way. But how long would it be before the American planes swept his meager air force aside and pounded his missile sites to dust? Saddam had played cat and mouse with his mobile missile systems in the desert for many weeks, but the American planes and missiles were much better now.

And even though Iran had been making efforts at strengthening its air defense systems in recent years, taking delivery of more advanced Russian made Tor-M1 and S-300 systems, they were too few and too widely

dispersed to provide a credible defense. The system had weak low altitude radar coverage, no overlapping radar network, shaky command and control systems, and inadequate electronic counter-countermeasures. So the so called ‘exercises,’ and all his bravado today before the press, was more talk than anything he could put to action. The surprises, he knew, would not come from his fixed wing aircraft, or from his ability to fend off a determined enemy air attack, but from the considerable missile forces Iran had been building over the last decade. The best defense, he knew, was a good offense. Iran could make any attack against its homeland a painful option for the aggressors.

The long war with Iraq had also proved the folly of trying to wage war with conventional ground forces, particularly against American equipped enemies. Millions of young Iranian men had died, some in suicidal WWI style human wave assaults against the prepared Iraqi defenses. Even the inferior Russian built T-55 and T-72 tanks Saddam had in inventory were enough to repulse such attacks, particularly when backed up by chemical weapons, napalm, artillery fire, wire, mines and a host of other defenses. God rot the soul of Saddam, he thought. The General’s son, a young Revolutionary Guardsman, had died in such a battle. Mighani passed several moments, imagining the last moments for Saddam. He would have liked to have been there, watching him hang.

Yes, the lesson of that long war was evident. The one weapon that seemed to in any way surprise the enemy was the short range ballistic missile. Capable of delivering large warheads over great distances, with reasonable accuracy, the missiles put the enemy urban centers into the war theatre and acted as a supreme weapon of terror. The famous ‘scud wars’ in the Gulf were a perfect example. They were far more effective than believed, and very few SCUDs had been successfully intercepted back then—not even by the American Patriot system. He knew those defenses were better now, but the Chinese had just demonstrated what a massed missile barrage could do to Taiwan.

So when he watched his old fighter planes perform their low level fly-bys, he knew that there would be little he could really do to defend against a determined American or Israeli air campaign. But we can hit back, he mused, not long, but long enough. The single missile in the belly of a British tanker this morning put a fine point to it. Only a very few of his planes or missiles would have to reach their targets to have a dramatic and devastating effect—a

very few. And there were some weapons he held close to his chest, the real surprises should the Americans ever be so bold as to strike mother Iran. He would get a chance to play his hand sooner than he hoped.

The phone rang. An adjutant handed him a new telex. The first page was obvious, though insulting. The Americans were over-flying Iranian soil with their damnable drones! It was time stamped thirty minutes ago. Three had made close approaches to Abu Musa in the Gulf, where a small outlying airfield was maintained with a few maritime patrol boats. He could smell the lies they would soon be vomiting in the UN. Then he read the second page, time stamped ten minutes later. It was signed by Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar and marked with the highest level of urgency:

US MARINES HAVE LANDED ON ABU MUSA
STAND READY

The Marines were indeed landing on Iranian soil, storming out of their hovercraft and helos covered by a phalanx of F-16 fighter groups that had massed over the Persian Gulf like a swarm of angry locusts. It took little time to occupy the tiny island of Abu Musa, where the leading companies in the first assault wave brushed aside light resistance from the small island garrison around the harbor, while other forces swooped down from helicopters to secure the island's small air strip.

The assault groups quickly secured the tiny harbor and quay where they had hoped to find the proverbial "smoking gun" in a rogue Iranian attack boat. Nothing was there. By the time Colonel Andar was ignominiously led off to interrogation by his Marine captors, the small attack craft that had skewered *Princess Royal* was deep below the oil-dark waters of the Persian Gulf. The frogmen had rendezvoused quietly with a small Iranian sub, which had then skirted off towards the Iranian territorial waters of the northern Gulf coast.

All across Iran the aging Iranian air force was scrambling to put planes in the air, expecting their airfields to come under blistering attack by cruise missiles and stealthy aircraft launched by the U.S. from its carrier groups and Gulf region bases. None came. The American response had been deliberately scaled to the simple objective of seizing Abu Musa to try and track the source of the terrorist attack, while writing a spectacular headline and poignant message to the Iranian Government at the same time.

An uneasy calm settled over the Gulf region, but tensions ratcheted high

as radar crews squinted at their screens in anticipation of the next retaliatory wave of incoming strikes. Missiles in Iran were fueling at a frantic place, and mobile launchers emerged from their hiding bunkers to prepare their deadly game of shoot and scoot. But for the moment, however, the missiles stayed on their launch pads.

The hours ticked by, and tensions slowly subsided. One by one the Iranian air force planes in the initial scramble defense waves were running low on fuel and returning to their bases. Too few rose to replace them, as the initial wave had sent more than 80% of the inventory aloft. In spite of recent drills, only 75 of the 125 aging F-4 Phantoms and F-5 Tigers were air worthy. Of these 60 had flown in the first alert wave, leaving fifteen to take their place in the hot late afternoon sun. There were still five old F-14 Tomcats and ten Mig 29s available as well.

All across the region radars were humming as they scoured the skies for any sign of incoming enemy aircraft. Yet nothing was seen. Then, a few minutes before dusk, the newly installed Syrian early warning radar facility atop Lebanon's highest peak at Mount Sannine, went dark. There were crucial minutes of confusion at Syrian Air Defense Command before they realized the facility had been destroyed by a missile. The source was not discovered, but the outpost had been hit by an Israeli Popeye Turbo cruise missile launched from a submarine in the Eastern Med. Other missiles were already on their way to strike similar early warning outposts in Iran, this time launched by Israeli submarines in the Persian Gulf. The hawkish government, always ready to exploit any opportunity, had chosen this delicate moment to launch their long planned air strike against new suspected Iranian nuclear facilities!

Even as the first alert wave of Iranian aircraft were landing for refueling, two Israeli air groups flying F-15 I and F-16 I fighters were being led by radar suppressing G-550 Suter and NCCT aircraft on a mission targeting uranium enrichment facilities in Qom and Natanz, as well as the heavy water reactor at Arak, the new facility at Bushehr, and the gas storage complex at Esfahan. The Israeli attack would look like a joint operation with the Americans, though Israeli diplomats had not revealed their intended strike date to politicos in Washington until the planes were well on their way. It was a necessary formality, for the Americans had supplied most of the KC-707 air refueling tankers and liberal allotments of missiles and bunker busting bombs that would be used in the attack.

The strike groups began their run up the Mediterranean coast, then turned East, flying low over Syria. With massive jamming and software attacks unleashed by the IDF, Syrian Air defense response was simply too slow, and the fledgling government there after Assad's fall years earlier was too reluctant to pick a fight with Israel in any case. The few anti aircraft missile batteries that managed to acquire Israeli targets were quickly extinguished from the grid as their radars fell prey to the AIM "Harm" anti-radar missiles. The strike groups were out of Syrian airspace in a flash, but even though the Iranians had been forewarned, there was little their own air defense could do about the attack.

The Israeli F-15 top cover swept aside the few remaining Iranian aircraft aloft to contest their approach, and the F-16s went to work. As night fell the moon was just off full and targets would soon begin lighting up the deepening dusk, their heavy laser and GPS guided ordinance pummeling the industrial heart of the Iranian nuclear program, at least those facilities that were known. The Israeli's were meticulous, and went after any known ballistic missile sites as well, though they knew they would be faced with a perpetual duel with mobile systems in the coming weeks.

Unable to prevent the attack, or hinder it an any way, the Iranians had a precious few minutes to consider reprisals. They could order a massive retaliatory strike, in keeping with the rhetoric of their own government in recent months, and "severely punish any aggressor who would dare to threaten or strike the Iranian homeland." But the Israelis were already finding and extinguishing a good number of the fixed Shahab missile sites. If they were to launch a counterattack, it had to be soon. Alternatively, they could stand down, ride out the storm, then take the role of the aggrieved victim and raise hell in the UN and every other international forum available. The scene the previous week in the UN with the Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese and Americans all exchanging accusations and threats did little to convince them the diplomatic route would prove fruitful. The attack on *Princess Royal*, would also stand as a flagrant violation of international law, and serve as an all too visible and obvious provocation.

Their third option was to take the conflict "international" and make the world suffer the consequences. The Straits of Hormuz and the oil rich Sheikdoms to the south were the most inviting and easily ignited targets a ballistic missile commander might ever have. They still had time to draw the sword of Islam and make their reprisal before the second wave of Israeli

planes went after their missile sites.

The Iranians had made up their minds.

At a little after 22:00 hours, Gulf time, the first wave of missiles left their launch pads. The Israelis had found, and destroyed, sixteen launching sites, those deemed most likely to harbor weapons packages that might be aimed at Israel. But the Iranian response had a far greater scope, taking in the full range of the target rich southern shores of the Persian Gulf. The oil storage bunkers and terminals at Al Fujairah, the world's third largest bunkering center, were among the many targets they had decided to strike, and the list was long.

Missiles were falling at the export terminals of Ras Tanura, Ras al-Ju'aymah and the industrial city of Al Jubayl in Saudi Arabia. The American facilities in Qatar were struck that night as well, along with the ports at Abu Dhabi, and a host of other key facilities along the coast. If the Iranians could not have atomic energy, the world would not have petroleum. The equation was quite simple. And added to the catastrophe already underway in the Gulf of Mexico, it would mark the end of modern life as so many had lived it for the last hundred years.

Assad al Arif watched amazed from his makeshift sasha, a palm frond fishing canoe bobbing at the end of its mooring rope a few miles south of the main oil storage facilities at Al Fujairah. He had been out all day, fishing as his father and grandfather before him, and now was simply tending and mending his nets in the quiet evening. Then the horizon to the north exploded in fury and red orange flame. An Iranian Shahab had struck the ENOC oil terminals there, igniting an inferno of burning oil and gas as one storage tank after another was engulfed in the holocaust of fire.

From far more plush accommodations in the city itself, the ruler of Fujairah, His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Mohammed Al Sharqi, and His Excellency Sheikh Hamad bin Saif Al Sharqi, his deputy, watched in horror as the oil storage bunkers burned out of control. Millions of barrels of oil would be consumed in a conflagration that sent massive clouds of broiling smoke aloft to further char the black night settling over the Straits of Hormuz.

Two of the world’s top five oil producing regions were now awash in flood and fire, and the third, and the newest and biggest in the Caspian region was now more vital than ever. The fires of rival clan contention in Kazakhstan were burning closer and closer to the massive Kashagan

superfields. And massing on the northern border, the Russian Army sat like a hungry wolf waiting to spring on its prey.

"And so it begins," said one Sheikh to another. The long feared "incident" in the Persian Gulf had finally ignited the well oiled kindling there, and the fires were burning.

"No my friend," said the able deputy to his Highness. "And so it ends..."

Part VII

Argonauts

“Loud rings the travail of those hands that first created war, the scourge of all the earth. For ere they dragged unknown iron from its stony bed and provided swords, Hatred roamed feeble and unarmed, Anger was resourceless, and Revenge slow.”

— Argonautica Book 5, Translated By J. H. Mozley

Chapter 19

The news went from bad to worse on *Medusa* platform that morning. Mudman had been monitoring the video and radio coverage out of Busachi where pump stations and corporate offices sat amid a field of storage tanks and piles of ling, black reserve oil pipeline.

"Hey Flackie," he called, pulling out his ear bud for a moment and lowering the volume. "We got us a hurricane now."

"What are you talking about Mudman?" Ben Flack was in no mood for more bad news. "That's old news. I've had Richmond on the phone all morning yammering about shortfall in the Gulf of Mexico. They lost some real big platforms out there."

"No—right *here*," Mudman pointed to his TV screen. "Those bastards at MECCA are calling for a major uprising. Calling it Hurricane Barbarossa or some shit. Named it after some damn Turkish Muslim Pasha. Even got old Azul Abar on board with them." Azul Abar was a notorious militant gangster/terrorist in the Region, and head of incipient insurgent group known as the Caspian Region Volunteer Force. He began playing the news feed from his monitor: *"About 0100 Hrs, today 'Hurricane Barbarossa' commenced with heavily armed fighters in hundreds of units filing out from different MECCA bases across the Caspian Region in solidarity to carry out destructive and deadly attacks on the oil industry in the Kazakh state."*

Apparently the militants had made good on their claims, blowing up a big Shell pipeline and reportedly razing nearby facilities. Several Shell employees were thought to have been killed in the incident. *"The foolhardy workers and soldiers who did not heed our warning perished inside the station."* The statement was being made by a MECCA colonel on the scene.

Mudman reached for the volume, turning it up a notch so Flack could hear better. The spot continued with a countervailing government spokesman: *"There is no war in the Caspian Region."* It was the Caspian information minister. *"The oil war propaganda is just a gimmick by the militants to create fear in every law-abiding citizen, both local and foreign alike, and to provoke tension in the polity. We are not aware of their antics and*

capabilities. The joint task force in place is very capable of containing the indiscretion of the militants. So there is nothing like war. The Kazakh government has been trying a combination of dialogue, consultation, and development of the region and, after consultation, we created a dedicated ministry to address these issues."

"What a load," said Mudman. "That guy must have been trained by Baghdad Bob. No war, eh? What's all the smoke and fire for then?"

Flack was at the Plexi screen, binoculars up and watching the menacing lighters closer to the shore. There had been bad news all morning, explosions inshore north of Busachi and south of Fort Shevchenko, pipelines destroyed, pump stations on fire, not to mention the loss of the Crowley tug *Galveston* and all its crew taken as hostages. He had called the local military and police to no avail, and the Merc order he had urgently placed had gone unfilled. There were just too many facilities at risk to adequately guard them all. The security forces in the region, and the fourteen hapless patrol boats of the Kazakh Navy, were already stretched thin, now locked in a death grip with MECCA rebels.

"We're too damn close to those bastards," Flack murmured. "Hell, they attacked the Shell platform a while back, and that was 24 miles off shore!"

"Where are those Mercs?" asked Mudman. "Better get a helo in here, boss."

The phone rang and Flack moved to his desk, irritated, his eyes still watching the coast for signs of hostile movement in his direction. He knew his time was running out. He'd be lucky if he could get a company helo now and get his people to safety.

It was Richmond again, only this time the manager at the other end of the line promised good news. *"We've got some help heading your way right now. Fairchild has three tankers on the way to Supsa, and we want you get anything you have into the trans Caspian pipeline to Baku."*

"What do you think I've been doing?" Flack bawled. "The problem is this: we're losing pump stations on shore and the flow pressure is down—Kapish?"

"Then rig to load your local tankers and move it that way. We need that oil bunkered in Baku ASAP."

Flack was shocked. "Yes, I have three or four tankers at Fort Shevchenko, but I can't even begin to contemplate an operation like that without security. You guys must be out of your minds!"

“Now calm down, Flack. We’ve got the security. Fairchild’s flagship is leading in tankers to Supsa.”

“A lot of good that will do me here,” Flack protested. “Supsa is on the Black Sea coast. This is the goddamned *Caspian*, or have you looked at a map lately?”

“Yes I can read a map. What I’m saying is that this Fairchild ship is a destroyer, or something like one, not one of their tankers—a ship called the Argos Fire. Rumor has it the damn thing is armed to the teeth. They have helos with the range to get out your way, and they have security personnel too.”

The mention of helos brightened Flack’s mood considerably. He took down the call sign and frequency to contact the Fairchild group, writing quickly with a dulled pencil.

“Now you just worry about those tankers. These helos are the new X-3 hybrids—something like an Ospry. I’ve heard they’re packing some mini guns and shit. Nobody is going to bother you, mark my words.”

Flack hung up, his mind racing. How was he supposed to get a loading operation started in this mess? He pulled up the flow diagrams on his computer. He had three pump stations down, but there was still #17, and a good line out to the platform. Even with pressure as low as it was, he could probably get something moving and loaded if he could keep #17 up. It was inshore in the shallows, however, a dangerous place to be.

“Mudman!” he yelled to get his tech’s attention. “Get on the blower and call Pump 17. Tell them we need them to get ready to push crude my way. Anything they can move.”

“What the hell we gonna do with it?”

“Never mind, just call them and tell them what I said.”

At that moment the sound of distant gunfire jangled his already frayed nerves. Flack ran to the Plexi screen, raising his binoculars. He saw three lighters heading directly toward his platform, bristling with brawny, dangerous looking men in camo fatigues. They were joy shooting in the air to announce their imminent arrival. He felt the cramp in his bowels tighten.

“We’re gonna have company, Mudman. Looks like the MECCA oil war is about to get personal.”

The shift tech was already peering at the scene with obvious anxiety. “I think you better tell the Rig Boss to put his sidearm away,” he breathed. “These guys look like hell warmed over.”

“Ain’t gonna be no PTA meeting,” said Flack. He considered the alternatives, edging over to his desk, his eyes riveted on the advancing boats.

But something was odd about their approach. They diverted left, circling briefly. Then Flack knew why. In the distance he heard the telltale thump, thump, thump of a helo, and turned to see two copters low on the horizon behind him.

“KAZPOL?” Mudman was at his side as Flack peered through his binoculars.

“Not from that direction... Can’t be Caverton either. Nothing I’ve seen round here before,” he breathed. “Maybe it’s this Fairchild Group.” In the nick of time will do, he thought.

“Fairchild?” Mudman was in the dark. “Who’re they?”

“Never mind who they are—you just get on the phone to #17 like I said.”

“Right, Flackie.”

The lighters continued to circle, like three sharks prowling around a great mechanical behemoth. Through his high powered lenses Flack had a good look at them, tough looking thugs, their faces swathed in black face masks or dark bandanas. Many wore white turban head dresses and checkered scarves. Each one sported ammunition belts draped over their shoulders, and they were heavily armed. They seemed equally perplexed by the approaching helos, some pointing at the aircraft and shouting. The shout was an order, Flack realized, when one of the men hefted a light machinegun and opened fire. The oil war, which the Caspian government denied, was now just a few hundred yards away.

Overhead, the two Fairchild helos saw the tracer rounds streaking up, wide off the mark, but close enough to get their attention. They were flying a modified version of the revolutionary Eurocopter X-3. With two turboshaft engines powering a five-blade main rotor system and two propellers on short-span fixed wings, it was capable of over 220 knots and could range out about 900 nautical miles at lower speeds. They made a high speed run into Baku, refueled at the BP facilities there, and then raced north, flying low over the Caspian Sea to reduce their radar signature in case there were unfriendly eyes out there. They made their approach on the eastern shore, well away from Russian assets in the region. This version was specially adapted by Fairchild engineers for security purposes. The twin 30mm rocket pods were augmented by a pilot controlled mini-gun mounted in the nose of the sleek craft.

The group leader, Lieutenant Ryan, barked an order when he saw the

tracer rounds sprayed in his direction, his voice heavy with the touch of silver as he spoke, a true thoroughbred Irishman. “I suppose we’d best intro*duce* ourselves to those gentlemen. Let them have a taste of the number one pod.” He was referring to one of the two weapons pods mounted on the stubby wings of the copter. His co-pilot and weapon’s master was only too keen to reply, thumb pressing the red fire button on his joystick a second later.

The helo shuddered as a salvo of three mini rockets ignited from the pod and churned into the sea directly in front of the lighter that had fired, sending a wild spay of water into the air. The exploding rockets rocked the other boats with heavy swell.

“That got their attention,” said Ryan, leaning on the stick to swing his craft off on an alternate heading. He dropped altitude and angled his rotors so they would chop more heavily at the air, creating an awful racket. Fairchild and Company was clearing its throat as its outriders arrived on the scene. “You can return those tracer rounds now. Shot across the bow will be enough, Tommy.”

“Aye, Sir.” The nose mounted mini-gun rotated quickly to acquire the target and the sleek metal barrels growled out a sharp burst. The rounds streaked into the water, very close to the lead boat that had fired at the copters.

Confusion reigned on the three boats as they circled the platform. Then they saw a man hefting up what appeared to be a shoulder fired weapon, which prompted Ryan to stiffen the lesson. “Better serve them another drink,” he shouted. “That’s looks like an SA-7! Get serious, Tommy!”

“Right-O, sir!” There mini gun rotated and fired, only this time the rounds tore into the lighter and leveled it with withering fire. It was enough to convince the locals in the other two boats that they had chosen the wrong platform for their oil war today. The remaining lighters turned and beat a hasty retreat toward the shore and safety, their bravado quashed by the firepower of this unexpected new adversary.

Back on *Medusa* Platform, Flack clenched his fist and beamed. “Thank God for small favors,” he said aloud. “Looks like the cavalry has arrived.”

“Lemme see,” said Mudman, hovering at his side. Flack passed him the glass so he could have a peek at the helos. “What’s that? Looks more like an Osprey?”

“Fairchild helos,” said Flack. “They look pretty mean, eh?”

The X-3s had circled the rig, lingering for ten minutes until there was no

further sign the militant lighters. Ryan used his long range camera optical system to keep a close eye on those boats, but he saw no further sign of any hostile action. Just in case there was another SA-7 close at hand he decided to gain some altitude, taking his helos up to 3000 meters, which was well under his service ceiling and yet beyond the range of the SA-7s. Then they swept inshore towards the coast in a roar of thumping rotors and turboprops.

The radiophone jangled and Flack picked up the receiver, irritated. “Now what?” he nearly shouted, still distracted by the helos. The voice on the other end of the line was unfamiliar.

“Chevron Medusa?”

“Yeah, this is Rig Manager Flack. Who’s this?”

“Fairchild and company. Captain Gordon MacRae speaking on board company flag Argos Fire. We’re arrived at Supsos Terminal and I took the liberty of sending in a few helos.”

“Right,” said Flack. “Corporate boys said we should expect you. Hope you people have some mercs aboard those things. I have eighteen people here on the platform, and we’re stuck under orders to keep moving any crude in the line. We’ve a good credit bunkered at Baku, and if this situation gets tamped down out here I’m good for the rest as long as you can provide the empty ships. You got tankers?”

“We’ll have two SuezMax ships with a million each and one smaller tanker ready to anchor for loading at Supsa and Kulevi in three hours—2,500,000 barrel carrying capacity all told.”

“Two and a half Million?” Flack glanced at his flow charts. “Christ that will take a good long day for you to load—and that under ideal conditions. I’ve got a million and a half bunkered at Baku. But I’ll need time to move that last million barrels over the line, and I’ve barely got a pulse on the main pipeline here right now. If I lose my last pump station we won’t be able to move a thing.”

“Where’s this pump station, Mr. Flack?”

“Inshore, right in the middle of all the ruckus out there. I have a three man crew there and they’re sacred shitless. Any chance you people can get one of those choppers out to boost morale?”

“We’ll do you one better, Mr. Flack. We’ve got good men on those helos we sent. In the meantime, could we set down on your landing platform and pick up someone who can take our helo out to this pump station? And we’ll need aviation fuel if you have any.”

“Roger that, Fairchild. I’ll have a man ready when you get here. But you better bring some muscle. I’ve been out here three years and I’ve never seen it this bad before. You’re likely to run into trouble inland too. As for the fuel, land at the air strip at Buzachi north of Fort Shevchenko. They’ve got what you need, unless the damn place has been overrun.”

“Roger Chevron. We copy that. We’ll be armed and ready.”

On board the bridge of the *Argos Fire*, MacRae scanned the coastline near the terminal, noting the pall of black smoke rising in the distance.

“That’s an oil fire,” he said calmly to his executive officer.

“Aye, sir, Morgan says there was another terrorist attack this morning. This time they went after an old fuel tank. Always hate to see it burning like that, but it looks worse than it is.”

MacRae nodded. “You can slow to one third. Take our two big ladies in for loading, Mister Dean. Our youngest daughter is going up to Kulevi with the *Iron Duke.* We’ll watch her big sisters down here, but no anchorage for us. I want us at a minimum of 10 knots at all times, cruising off shore like a shark, if you get my meaning.”

“Aye, sir. Let’s hope we have a quiet night.”

“We will if the Russian don’t get too curious. I’ll be in the executive suites. Let me know the instant you see any air/sea movement in our direction. We’re only 400 kilometers southeast of Novorossiysk, and that’s too damn close for my liking.”

“Didn’t have any trouble getting here, sir.”

“Getting here with three empty tankers is one thing, but now we’ve stuck our head in the bear’s mouth, eh? Getting those ships out again with their bellies full of crude is another matter. You have the bridge, Mister Dean.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Dean gave him a crisp salute as he was piped off the bridge. Five minutes later MacRae knocked softly on the door to Fairchild’s offices, the worry in his eyes too obvious to hide.

Chapter 20

“Come.”

He let himself in, removing his hat as he entered.

“Afternoon,” he said matter of factly, crossing the plush carpeting.

“Yes,” said Fairchild, “but not a good one.” She had a harried expression, her face tired and drawn.

“Complications?”

“*Princess Royal* is in trouble,” she said bluntly. “The fire is burning too hot to contain with retardant. The bulkheads forward of the damaged sector may be weakening. The tugs have arrived, but she’s still in distress and moving her under these circumstances is going to be very dicey.”

“Doesn’t sound good,” the Captain commiserated.

“It sounds absolutely frightening.” She returned. “I’ve got calls out to anyone I can find in Al Fujairah for an at-sea offloading operation, but it’s going to be very risky. If one of the other holding tanks becomes involved in this fire we may not be able to save the ship.”

“The aft compartments should be accessible,” MacRae suggested. “That’s three of the five—some 600,000 barrels. Vopak and Van Ommeren both have at sea loaders at Al Fujairah.”

“Yes, they’ll be underway in an hour, or so I’m told. But that’s a lot of crude, and we’ve lost the main pumps on *Princess Royal*. They’ll have to bring in new equipment.” She gave him a defeated look. “And she’s listing five degrees…”

“They’ll compensate for that. Shouldn’t be any trouble to correct that with ballast.”

“Some of the oil in the center hold has begun leaking into the ballast zone,” she said. “Damn double hulled tankers. They’re top-heavy and unstable.”

After the Exxon-Valdez incident all tankers calling on US ports had to be doubled hulled. The space between hulls was often used for fuel or ballast, with small areas for maintenance access. Fuel leakage into this area could be very hazardous. MacRae knew the danger that the fire would spread was now very real. Elena looked at him, clearly disturbed. “I think we may lose her, Gordon.”

She didn’t often address him by his first name, and the sound of it was

welcome. He wanted to move closer, offer something more to reassure her, but found the distance between them imposed by their roles as Captain and CEO too difficult to bridge.

"We don't know that yet," he reasoned. Men always needed to fixed things, he thought. Every problem was met with a potential solution, some workable alternative in the mind of a man. Elena Fairchild, for all her discipline and the hard edge to her character honed by business dealings, was nonetheless a woman. She processed things quite differently. MacRae was sensitive enough to understand this, and took a different tack.

"Here," he said. "A bit of good news. It seems our local rebels didn't want to tangle with our helos and the Argonauts. They beat a hasty retreat for the Caspian coast. We have a fast boat out now with a twelve man security team watching over that rig. The men are going to secure the airfield at Buzachi, refuel the choppers and then see about getting out to one of their pump stations so they can move what they have in the line into Baku to top off their bunker credit. *Princess Angelina* should be loading here in an hour or so. *Princess Marie* will be right behind her, and our little girl, *Princess Irene* will be up at Kulevi with the *Iron Duke."*

"Dangerous up there," she said. "Too close to the Russians north of Poti like that. Mack tells me there's a Russian military base just 10 kilometers north at Nachkadu. Too bad Supsa didn't have enough storage for all three ships here."

"At least we'll be loading two ships at one time this way," said MacRae. "And I've posted a squad of Argonauts with *Princess Irene*."

Elena nodded half-heartedly, and he stepped over to the coffee bar. "You look like you could use a spot of tea," he said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as possible.

She mustered a wan smile. "I'm exhausted," she confessed.

He poured her a cup from the ivory pot she kept at the ready. Two lumps, with a twist of lemon, just as she liked it. "She's tough old gal," he said, coming round to *Princess Royal* again, his voice softening. "She'll hold up long enough to get a good bit off into Volker's tankers. They'll manage."

"There's more…" She took the cup, here dark eyes finding his, appreciating his closeness at the moment, the masculine presence, the quiet competence of the man.

"What more?"

"Cable on my desk," she said, too beset at the moment to explain.

He stepped away and saw the telex, reading it quietly, his brow raising a bit as he did so.

“I see,” he said. “Marines on Abu Musa. Leave it to the Americans to jump right in like that.”

“What are they up to? The Iranian’s will be up in arms and a big chunk of my company is right in the thick of it over there!”

“Intel thinks this was a missile,” said MacRae. “Maybe the Americans know something more.”

“Oh, they’ve been angling for a reason to go after Iran since they knocked off Saddam,” she said, exasperated.

“Yes, well I can’t imagine they’re still spoiling for a fight right now with what’s been going on in the Pacific. Bloody hell out there on Taiwan, from the latest news. Mack has the full report if you want it.”

“I’ve’ enough bad news for the moment,” she said. “Fact is, Marines are on Iranian soil.”

“That island is disputed territory,” he said quickly.

“Yes, but the Iranians have an airfield there, and they won’t take this lying down.”

She shrugged with disgust. “Perhaps someone should gently suggest to the Iranians that taking pot shots at oil tankers in the Gulf is hardly conducive to the promotion of peaceful commerce. Insurance rates are going to skyrocket again, not to mention oil prices, which the only thing that might save us in this situation,” Fairchild conceded a crack of hope in the otherwise bleak news. “Oil’s moving. It’s gained $16. on the exchange in the last hour, and futures are already at $175.”

“It’ll go higher,” said MacRae. “Traders are fleeing to commodities again to escape the mess in the US financial system. With *Thunder Horse* down in the Gulf of Mexico and the Straits of Hormuz closed—pipeline into Ceyhan blown too, well, it’ll go higher, you can count on that.”

“So we’ve got to salvage that oil on *Princess Royal.* If we can at least get those three compartments ashore it might just be enough. Then we take everything we can get here and get the hell out of this place as quick as we can.”

MacRae pursed his lips, his jaw set with the realization that she was probably right. Things were wound up tight enough in the Gulf, he thought, and someone has lit the match. Now it was more than the oil in *Princess Royal* at stake. The whole region could erupt at any moment, and the price of

oil would erupt with it. It was certain to do so. It was just a matter of time, and very little of that remained.

Even as he was contemplating this, the telex began chattering yet again, as if reading his very thoughts and telling him the worst had already happened. Elena Fairchild turned, half afraid to look. She leaned to read the text, her head shaking with an air of disillusionment as she did so.

"It gets worse every minute," she said quietly, pinching the bridge of her nose between her eyes where the headache had been bothering her the last hour.

"More trouble?" MacRae stated the obvious.

"It appears so," she said. "The Israelis are at Iran's throat again and the Mullahs started firing ballistic missiles! The hit installations all along the Gulf coast—my *god*, look at this list! They hit Ras Tunura, Al Jubayl, Al Fujairah. This is insane!"

She rushed to the telescreen and had up a news feed. Initial reports looked very bad. The life blood of Western civilization was burning in the Persian Gulf.

In these same crucial minutes, the fires aboard the beleaguered *Princess Royal* had spread to yet another compartment, and now threatened the massive central reservoir on the ship. There had been another explosion aboard the tanker, and she was listing. Even as word came of the Israeli strike on Iran, secure phone lines sent emergency signals to the *Argos Fire* notifying the Fairchild CEO that her flagship tanker was now doomed to near total loss. The chaos at the port would prohibit any further rescue operation.

MacRae took the decrypt, reading it with sad, dark eyes, his lips pursed, jaw set, brows heavy. "I'm not one to cry wolf, Madame," he began, "but I don't know whether our big lady will make it out of there now. You may have to be prepared to lose her."

"Along with half a billion dollars in oil."

The oil recovery operations had to be terminated due to the raging fires, and the ship continued to list while frantic tugs attempted to push her out of the main sea lanes and rig heavy towing lines to move the stricken vessel to shallower waters near the coast. But *Princess Royal* would not reach the safety of the jetties and docking quays of the port at Al Fujairah, and her captain would not rest easy that evening at the International Marine Club there. Al Fujairah was also on fire.

"Then this is it, Gordon," she said quietly. "This is all we've got now—

those three tankers out there waiting for oil from Baku. When news of this hits home they'll start to renege on every contract pending. Oil is going to be worth $200 a barrel in a few hours, if not sooner. Three days from now it will be up another hundred. We've bloody well got to get these tankers loaded, and that fast. How many men did we sent out to Kashagan?"

"The Argonauts? Nine man squad per helo, with two non-comms. Twenty man team in all." MacRae was surprised she could so easily shrug off this news on *Princess Royal.* She was already moving on to the situation here, and he soon found out why.

"Then we still have some muscle here?"

"Three squads, m'lady. Thirty-three men, though I have one squad with Princess Irene up north."

"Get the rest ashore. Secure the loading facilities. Get engineers with them as well. Nobody is going to back out on *my* contract. Not while I've got this ship and a couple squads of very dangerous men to set this right."

"You mean to simply *take* the oil?"

"Take it? It's mine already! I've a letter of credit on file at the exchange for everything Chevron has bunkered at Baku. Made the trade this morning before *Princess Royal* was hit. Yes, we'll lose the ship, but her oil belongs to Chevron now."

"But Chevron hasn't even taken possession of that oil yet."

"A minor detail."

"They'll say the contract was contingent upon safe delivery and claim non-performance."

"They can argue with me in court over it six months from now," She smiled, a fiery light in her eyes. "In the meantime, I'm damn well going to take possession of this oil here—every drop I can get my hands on. And if anyone thinks they can back out of the deal now they'll have to get past my Argonauts first. Understand?"

MacRae took a long breath. "I do indeed," he said.

She sat at her desk, eyes staring blankly at the screen, a simmering anger inside her that was slowly giving way to a feeling of thrumming anxiety. She could still lose it all, she thought, not just *Princess Royal* but all her remaining tankers as well. She could lose the whole damn company in the next forty-eight hours, but what did that matter in the grand scheme of things? She knew, deep down, that it was something more than the fear of imminent ruin and bankruptcy that was plaguing her. It was that damn phone

call—the red phone—the signal she had received in those three agonizing words: *Geronimo*, *Geronimo*, *Geronimo*….

It was back, she mused darkly. *Kirov* was back in the here and now, and God only knows what had happened to the world while it was gone—happened so subtly that few, if any, could perceive it. The words of Shakespeare whispered again in her inner ear: “Hell is empty, and all devils are here.”

What were those devils up to, she wondered? What did they do to change the course of events in that distant era, the time of her grandfather’s day, when the world was locked in a titanic struggle from one end of the globe to another? The same unanswered question that had plagued the Watch for the last 80 years returned to haunt her. What did the Russians know? They had tried to penetrate that iron curtain for decades, but it was late in the game before the Watch had been able to establish a foothold deep inside the Russian intelligence community itself. They finally had a man inside, and all reports seemed to indicate that the Russians were still fumbling in the dark about *Kirov’s* sojourn to the 1940s. So it was not an official act of the Russian government to send the ship there. That was the great revelation that had finally been confirmed. It had been an accident—a strange and inexplicable accident—or was it? Other information indicated the Russians had been doing some very odd things in and around their nuclear testing sites. The Americans too.

It all has something to do with that damn ship, she thought. The answer has to be there. Yet her latest intelligence on that indicated *Kirov* had put to sea two days ago, leading out the Russian Red Banner Pacific Fleet. What will the Americans make of that, she wondered? Then word came in on the secure line late last night. Admiral Yates, the current director of the ultra secret organization, had come to a decision on the question that had been debated by all the Twelve Apostles for some time. Now that *Kirov* had been seen to vanish and reappear, and the time of the ship’s intervention to the past had been finally discovered, should the ship be destroyed?

They went round and round on that issue, with some members feeling that it would be better to use espionage to try and ascertain just how the ship was able to move in time. Others refuted that with the assertion that the “incident,” as it came to be called, was an accident, mere happenstance, and that the ship had no voluntary control over its movement into the past. They cited that a nuclear detonation seemed to be involved in at least two observed

shifts, the first witnessed by the Royal Navy in 1941 when Task Force 16 was destroyed, and the second witnessed by the Submarine *Ambush* this very year. This explained the strange activities involving above ground nuclear tests, and it was also a far less nefarious explanation of the event, yet one that left several members unsatisfied, Elena Fairchild among them. *Kirov* had also appeared in the Med and in the Pacific, and no evidence of any nuclear detonations were involved in those incidents.

In the end the Council of Twelve, as it was called when the Watch convened a major meeting, was split six to six on the issue, and the deciding vote went to Admiral Yates. The order was given to seek the immediate destruction of the battlecruiser *Kirov* and therefore close the possibility, once and for all, that the ship would ever again return to plague the Royal Navy of the past. High ranking officials in the US government were always seated as members of the Twelve, and when *Kirov* was seen to sortie again in the Pacific they saw to it that orders were quickly relayed to find and sink the ship at any cost.

She sighed inwardly, realizing that if the time breach was something peculiar to the ship itself, its cause would now never be discovered. Perhaps that is for the better, she thought. The power to change the course of events in the here and now was a heady enough drink for any man to stomach, or any woman. The power to change the course of history by altering *past* events was too great to even fathom. Yet she wondered, even now, what the men aboard that ship ever truly learned about what had happened to them.

Then the intelligence line rang again and her reverie broke. She came back to the moment, seeing Captain MacRae still standing there, hat in hand, looking at her strangely as though he could discern the inner turmoil of her thoughts. She smiled wanly, attempting to give him a thin reassurance that she was still in the fight, then reached for the line.

“Fairchild….Yes…. I see. Very well. Yes, I think we’d better have a look, but be discrete. Report as soon as you know more.”

“More bad news?” asked MacRae.

She cocked her head to one side, considering. “Well here’s a strange bird,” she said. “That was Mack Morgan. I guess I ruffled his feathers over that lapse with Salase, and now he’s ferreting out anything he can find. Well, it may be nothing, but he seems to have gotten wind of an operation underway in the Caspian—a Russian operation. It appears that some unusual assets are deploying to the Makhachkala area, and it involves a ship called

the *Anatoly Alexandrov.”*

She was typing something at her computer terminal. “That’s odd. I just looked it up on the register and it’s a floating nuclear reactor; not a warship—presently anchored ten kilometers off the Caspian coast and listed as inactive. It seems Intel picked up a lot of activity at the Russian naval base at Kaspiysk, and that ship seems to be the focal point. We have helos out there. Think we might be able to sneak a peek with some long range cameras?”

“That would be risky,” said MacRae. “Let’s not forget about those long range Russian missiles. But we could see about getting a UAV up for a look. I’ll bet our friends in NATO might help, if it’s deemed critical.”

“I can *make* it critical,” said Elena, and MacRae knew she would do exactly that.

Chapter 21

Evening came, one more in its endless round. Light, pale and diffused, washed over the gray bank of low clouds that slouched heavy and tiresome in the still air and obscured the winding interface of land and sea with its listless presence. And the sea itself moved with a languorous swell; the land lay hushed and subdued. The helmsman aboard *Argos Fire* gazed out on the indolent waters of the bay, leaden-eyed and waiting for relief.

The ‘wine dark sea’ was Homer’s poetic description for the deep burgundy stillness that falls upon the waters of the sea at sunset. Achilles was said to have looked upon it as he mourned the loss of his beloved Patroclus, killed by Hector before the gates of Troy. Achilles would have been gazing at the Aegean, but as Captain MacRae looked west that evening, the calm waters of the Black Sea seemed a blood red merlot, deepening to shadowy black on the horizon. The sea belies itself, he thought. If Morgan is right on this one, we’ll have trouble soon, and more than we need.

Mack had sent up an Intelligence decrypt indicating that the Russian Black Sea Escadra was about to sortie—bad news for Fairchild & Company at a time like this.

He watched as the sun fattened over the water, the sky a wash of crimson and charcoal gray. MacRae was standing with his executive officer, Commander William Dean, and they were watching the long range returns on the Sampson AESA Radar system for any sign of what Morgan had warned. It was an active electronically scanned array that could broadcast a strong signal spread out over the band so effectively that it seemed little more than background noise to other receivers. The radar was mounted atop the tall, fully enclosed mainmast that had been characteristic of the Type 45 destroyer, and *Argos Fire* was exactly that.

The Sampson array sat in a great white ball at the top of the main mast, rotating inside at 30 revolutions per minute. The AESA technology allowed it to generate many more sub-beams than a typical radar set, and therefore track many more targets at one time. It also changed frequency with each pulse

sent out and could send a rainbow of varied frequencies out in a single beam. In effect, it had powerful detection capabilities while remaining difficult to intercept by other radar listening devices and highly resistant to jamming.

Positioned high above the sea, it also provided excellent coverage against any low level target while extending the overall horizon distance. It could therefore range out to 400 kilometers, all the way up the Black Sea coast to the big Russian naval base at Novorossiysk. MacRae didn't like what he saw there on the signal returns.

"I'm getting multiple contacts now," said Radar man Haley. " Yes, sir. It looks like they're getting ASW helos up off their frigates. I'd say Morgan was correct. The fleet is putting out to sea."

"As will we in short order," said MacRae, looking at his wrist watch. The loading operation had been underway for some time, and went faster than expected. Authorities at the terminal were initially prone to haggle, producing reams of administrative paperwork and sending over requests for verification of letters of credit. The Terminal was principally a British Petroleum project established at the turn of the century, but was now 100% nationalized by the Georgian State. A half hour later they were much more cooperative. MacRae had dispatched two squads of Argonauts, the elite commando that served the interests of the ship, and the Fairchild Corporation. The men fanned out to secure the four big storage tanks the fiscal metering station, with a special detail assigned to guard the central control room and export loading system.

The three Fairchild tankers were docked well offshore, and the export system was a series of diesel driven pumps that moved crude oil from the storage tanks through the export meter, and then into a 36 inch pipeline that extended over 5 kilometers to a securing buoy off shore. Here there were several 20 inch floating hoses that would connect to the waiting tankers. It was soon clear that Elena Fairchild would have her oil, one way or another, and the loading procedure had been underway for a little over three hours before the trouble began.

The Georgian Terminal Export official's new found smile had been little more than a thin veil. He had apparently made a call to the coast guard base at Poti, and Haley soon reported he had a close signal return of a small craft approaching the loading zone.

"What have we got, Mister Haley?" MacRae was at his side again.

Haley had been checking his database and was quick to answer. "Georgian Coast Guard patrol craft, a single boat, Grif Class. Forty-eight

tonner. It's small, fast, but not much of a threat. It has an eleven man crew with two twin 12.7mm machine gun turrets, manually operated. That's all the bite they have."

"Well that may not impress the two of us," said MacRae, "but I wouldn't want them raking the hull of any of our little princesses out there with those guns."

"Aye, sir."

They could hear the distant whine of a siren as the patrol craft bravely rushed to the scene. MacRae wanted them on the radio and moments later he was speaking with the boat's skipper.

"Top of the morning," he said calmly. "Captain Gordon MacRae, Fairchild Enterprises, aboard corporate HQ *Argos Fire* here. How may we assist you?"

There was a brief pause before the return call came. *"Good morning, Captain. I have received a call from the Georgian Export Ministry and it seems that we have instructions to close this terminal. You will have to cease loading operations at once. Over."*

MacRae raised an eyebrow. Elena Fairchild would not stand for that in any wise, so he decided to explain the situation. "See here," he began. "We've proper letters of credit, all approved in the last twenty four hours. We've export credits that are more than adequate for the tonnage involved. Our operation is well underway and we have a tight schedule to meet."

"That may be so, Captain, but I have my orders. You will have to cease operations and move your tankers off shore beyond the ten kilometer marker. Over."

MacRae looked over his shoulder at his XO, Commander Dean. "He's not much impressed by our paperwork, Mister Dean."

"It doesn't sound like it, sir."

"Well, I'm not much impressed by his twin MG mounts either. I think we'll just continue with the operation and ignore this situation for the moment. Let's see if he's prepared to press the matter."

They watched as the boat approached. "Those were once KGB boats, were they not, Mister Haley?"

"I believe so, sir. They were taken over by the old Georgian Navy and then folded into the Coast Guard."

"Anything else they might send our way?"

"No, sir. They had two missile boats, *Dioskura* and *Tiblisi*, but they're

sitting at the bottom of the bay at Poti up north. The Russians beat up what was left of the force pretty bad in that scrap they had with Georgia in 2008. They have a total of five of these boats left, and a couple P-24 fast attack boats they bought from Turkey. Both those are at *Batumi*, sir."

Another radio call came in from the boat, this time more insistent. *"Captain MacRae, we have no word that you are ready to comply with our instructions. I must insist you terminate your operation at once."*

MacRae wanted to be careful here. The pipeline that fed the four big storage tanks at the terminal stretched all the way through Georgian territory to Baku in Azerbaijan. It could be interdicted at any of a hundred points along that line. Furthermore, Georgia was an ally of the West, though a skittish one at the moment with the Russians breathing down their neck again. There had to be political considerations here, and MacRae wanted to know more.

"Get Mack Morgan on the line," he said to Dean, and a moment later he had his Intelligence Chief, asking him about the situation on a secure line.

"Sorry for the surprise, Captain," said Mack. *"It seems the Russians are leaning on the Georgian Government pretty hard and threatening intervention if they don't shut down all oil terminal exports on this line."*

"This is starting to paint a pretty black picture, Mack. The BTC line is down, the Straits of Hormuz are closed, there's trouble at Kashagan and they've even hit the big platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. This is the last major line open and we're sucking on the damn thing for all its worth. The only other crude source open would be Nigeria."

"No question about it, Gordie. The Russians have sent in border guard detachments to all the outposts on the frontier in Abkhazia. There's activity at the military garrison in Sochi up north, and a motorized column is heading that way from Novorossiysk. We just got word that the 2nd Georgian Infantry Brigade has orders to deploy to Supsa and Poti to deter any further movement into Georgian territory, and they're going to be in our hair soon enough."

"Is this a private fight, or can anybody get in on it?" MacRae repeated the old Irish barroom challenge.

"We're going to be right in the thick of things if the situation deteriorates," said Morgan. *"That infantry brigade could be sending a full battalion to secure these facilities according to one source on the ground here. We haven't confirmed that yet, but it's something to consider."*

“A wee bit more than the Argonauts can manage. How soon will they get here?”

“Three hours, maybe four. There’s a bridge they need to cross just a few klicks inland on the river. We still have an X-3 aboard and could get men out there if you know what I’m thinking.”

“I do indeed,” MacRae smiled.

“The river runs north of the terminal. We get that bridge and the one here over the estuary at the mouth of the river and we’ve got the place, lock, stock and oil barrel.”

“I’ve already got a full squad on the estuary bridge. I’ll take your advice, Mack, but this could get delicate. All they have to do is cut the flow on this line and they can choke off that oil any time. Then we’re limited to what we have in the tanks here.”

“Six holding tanks, 40,000 tons per tank,” said Mack. *“That’s just under 300,000 barrels per tank—almost two million barrels on hand at the moment, enough to top off both our tankers here.”*

“We’ve half of that aboard *Princess Angelina* already. I just need time to load *Princess Marie,* that’s all. Is there any way we can block that bridge up river without blowing the damn thing to hell?”

“Leave that to me, Gordie. I’ll handle it with the X-3.”

“Get you a case of beer for that one, Mack. Get to it.”

“Aye, sir.”

MacRae signed off and crossed his arms, grinning at the Georgian patrol craft now circling in the waters between *Argos Fire* and the loading operation servicing *Princess Angelina.* “What are they doing out there, waving at us, Mister Haley?”

“I think they’re getting a little impatient, sir.”

Dean cut in. “Look there…They’ve rotated that forward MG turret our way, sir.”

“Have they?” MacRae, reached for his field glasses, observing the patrol craft for a moment. The radio chattered again, and the heavily accented English from the patrol boat seemed more insistent. *“Argos Fire, Argos Fire. Prepare to be boarded. Over.”*

“Prepare to be boarded? Tell them we have no time to receive them at the moment. And make it clear, Mister Haley.”

“Aye, sir.” Haley sent a firmly worded response, but the patrol craft edged closer, and now sounded its siren, as though the sound alone would be

sufficient to enforce its will in the situation. *Argos Fire* was a big ship, but the re-design had cleverly hidden all her potent weaponry. The *Iron Duke* was well away from the scene, thirty kilometers to the north with *Princess Irene*, so MacRae reasoned this Coast Guard unit thought they were simply dealing with a civilian vessel, and that the two twin MG mounts at their disposal were a significant enough of an advantage to intimidate the bigger ship, the only military caliber weapons in play.

"Captain of the Argos Fire," came the radio call again. *"If you do not comply with our orders at once we will be forced to take stronger measures."*

"Listen to that man, Mister Dean. He's already forgotten my name, and his 'instructions' have now become orders. Very impolite, wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed, sir."

"I think we might give him a peek at what he's dealing with here. We wouldn't want him to make a mistake he'll soon come to regret. Raise the forward deck gun and show him the muzzle."

"Aye, sir. Mister Conners, if you please."

Connors was the Weapons Systems Operator, and he quickly complied, toggling a switch on his panel. "Forward turret active and ready, sir."

They heard the deck panels sliding open and the hydraulics lifting the turret into view. It was a modified BAE Mark 8 naval gun in an angled stealth turret using a new barrel and breech designed for the AS-90 self-propelled gun in the British Army. Fairchild had purchased one on a special order and implemented a BAE plan to up-gun the older Mark 8 turret with this newer 155mm third generation maritime fire support system. The sleek barrel rotated smoothly to bear on the advancing patrol craft, gleaming in the rosy light of the setting sun. MacRae took hold of his radio handset and decided he would explain things.

"Georgian Coast Guard," he began, his tone formal and firm. "I regret to inform you that we are unable to terminate loading at this time and cannot allow boarding of this ship under any circumstances. Any attempt to do so will be opposed. This is a special operation sanctioned by the British government, so I advise you to stand clear of our loading zone. I have orders to secure and protect all at-sea assets here, and I will not hesitate to do so if you interfere. And you might have a look at our forward deck if you think I'm talking through my beer foam. Over."

MacRae was looking through his field glasses again, and saw a man in

naval whites emerge from the pilot house of the patrol boat arms on his hips as he stared at the *Argos Fire.* He made a frustrated gesture and the siren cut off. The patrol boat slowed, still cruising about a thousand yards from the *Argos*, but now diverted from its threatening advance.

Soon the sound of the X-3 helo cut through the stillness of the oncoming night as the helicopter lifted from the aft deck and smartly pivoted about. Mack Morgan was aboard with five Argonauts, and MacRae smiled when he saw the helo sweep out and hover just off the bow of the Georgian patrol boat, the heavy downwash of his props flattening the water around the boat and sending up a sheet of white wet spray. MacRae was back on the radio.

“Georgian Coast Guard,” he said. “To prevent any further misunderstanding, that’s a 4000 RPM mini-gun in the nose of that chopper, and that big baby out on my forward deck is a 155mm QF naval battery. Now, my radar man here tells me you’ve got a whole lot of trouble up north in the Russian Black Sea fleet. Let’s not have a squabble among friends here. I’d much rather stand with you than against you if they come south, but I have my orders. Understood?”

This time there was silence from the other end of the line, and MacRae folded his arms, smiling. “I think they got the message.”

Part VIII

The Demon

“What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter 22

“Bear Hunt!” Rodenko exclaimed. “They’re sending fighters after our A-50Us.”

That got Karpov’s attention immediately. Bear hunt was the old warning call from the days when the Bear-D turboprop was Russia’s long range recon asset. The handle stuck, even though the old Bears were now sleeping quietly in their caves for a long hibernation with mothballs. Fighters vectoring in on the A-50-U AEW planes would be the opening notes in the symphony that was about to be played, the harsh clash of cymbals to sound the thunder that would soon follow. He was quickly at Rodenko’s side.

“What do we have down there?”

“Black Bear has a Mig-29 off *Kuznetsov* in escort here,” Rodenko pointed, but it’s getting hungry for fuel by now. Red Bear is all alone further east. They were tasked to keep an eye on Nimitz. No threat there at the moment.”

“Get Black Bear out of there,” said Karpov, his eyes narrowing. “It seems our Captain Tanner is not going to honor our little agreement.”

“It could be a bluff, sir,” Rodenko suggested.

“We’ll know that soon enough.” Karpov turned to Nikolin. “Signal Naval HQ Fokino. Call Sign *Bear Hunt*.” Karpov had spent some time huddling with Admiral Volsky before the fleet left Vladivostok, and Volsky had assured him his ships would not be alone. The Fleet Naval Air Arm was going to have bombers waiting in racetrack orbits with aerial refueling tankers, and from the moment Karpov had concluded his tentative negotiation, these planes were ordered up and ready to support the fleet if called upon. By signaling *Bear Hunt*, Karpov was telling the Admiral the Americans were beginning their attack. There was no other way to interpret the deliberate advance of fighters on his long range AEW assets—not under these circumstances.

Nikolin sent the signal, and minutes later a coded message returned from Fokino. “It’s just two words, sir,” said Nikolin, a bemused look on his face. “Andrei Nikolayevich.”

Karpov smiled. “Andrei Nikolayevich Tupolev, Mister Nikolin. Our TU-22M3 strike bombers are coming.” He thought for a moment, his heart heavy

on the one hand as he contemplated the orders he must now give and looked to the hours ahead. The code was Volsky's authorization to proceed with his plan, yet after the grueling experience on the last several months, seeing the ship in battle, men killed, he was stricken with the gravity of the moment. We did not want the war, he knew, but it is coming to us under the wings and fuselages of those American strike planes. If we have to fight it, then I owe it to the ship, the men, and my country to do all I can to win. The thrum of excitement chased his reservations away. It always came to him when battle stations would sound, one part adrenaline, one part fear, one part an earnest love of the fight. You could not be a man of war and not feel that, he realized. It was time to fight.

Karpov clasped his hands behind his back, eyes narrowing, a posture Rodenko had seen time and time again as he prepared to give the order to engage in combat. He knew what was coming next.

The Captain turned to the log officer. "Let the record indicate that, on orders from Naval Headquarters Fokino I am now engaging the American Carrier Task Group *Washington*. Captain Vladimir Karpov commanding. Time stamp and record."

"Sir," called a *mishman* of the watch. "The log is entered and now recording."

"Very well, Mister Nikolin—signal the *Admiral Kuznetsov*. Send one word: Pustomazovo."

Nikolin raised his eyebrows again. "Sir, sending code Pustomazovo, aye." He had no idea what he was sending, but the Captain of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* knew exactly what it meant. It was the birth place of the Russian aircraft designer Tupolev, informing him the strike package was deploying, and the signal to move his available fighter cover into a screening position for the Tu-22s. NATO called the old bombers *Backfires*, and Volsky had fifteen of the newly upgraded TU-22M3s, all adapted for carrying long range weapons. The Russians were now going to show the West just what had been going on in their missile labs for the last ten years.

It was called the KH-32, a longer range version of the older KH-22 "Kitchen" that the *Backfire* once carried. This new missile had a long arm indeed, a thousand kilometer range, and a very unusual attack profile. With a performance ceiling of an incredible 44,000 meters, the missile climbed to the edge of space to enable it to look down and well beyond the horizon of the attacking aircraft to acquire its target, and it was getting help from

Russian satellites that had been watching the American carrier groups for some time. The new computer brain in the missile could also analyze and classify its targets to set strike priority. Once it determined its objective, it closed at a high supersonic speed that was very difficult to intercept.

It was Russia's answer to the fact that *Admiral Kuznetsov* was their only aircraft carrier. Karpov had decided early on to use the ship and its precious naval air assets as a defensive shield, and not a long range strike weapon. He wanted all twenty-eight Mig-29Ks and the fourteen SU-33s positioned for air defense, and their first mission was to screen and protect the *Backfires*. As things stood, by the time the American AWACs on the line picked up the bombers, it would be too late. The improved range of the KH-32 missile would allow them to fire and then withdraw, safe behind the Russian air defense screen.

Karpov would have the final word as to whether or not the bombers would engage, but time was running out. He had Rodenko watching the situation on his closest AEW plane, Black Bear, and then the report he had feared and expected finally came.

"Two American fighters now inside 100 kilometer range, sir. Black Bear reports active radar lock…" Rodenko looked at the Captain, his features drawn and set. "Missiles in the air, sir. They have fired on the A-50."

Karpov took a long breath, hands still clasped behind his back. And so it begins, he thought. It was not the Royal Navy of 1942 this time. The Americans of 2021 had just fired the first shot, meant to blind him to what would soon follow, a fist full of sand in his eyes before the main attack. So be it.

He no longer had the luxury of musing over the fate of the world. There did not seem to be anything he could do in the here and now to avoid what was coming next. Now the game would move to the struggle for the first salvo between the two naval flotillas set to engage. He had no doubt that the planes off those carriers would be attacking his fleet within the hour. His adversary thought he had the upper hand with the ranged firepower of his air assets. He was wrong.

"Mister Nikolin," he said calmly. "Send the signal Red Banner One." He would get his KH-32s in the air, and the first salvo would be his. The *Backfires* had overflown the *Admiral Kuznetsov* where it was positioned north of Iturup Island and its restless Demon volcano. They were flying high at just over 40,000 feet, avoiding the emerging ash plume from the eruption

now underway. Get the missiles off now, thought Karpov—especially the air breathers. The ramjet driven high speed cruise missiles would need clear skies.

The planes had a big KH-32 under each wing and a reserve on the fuselage. When they received the signal, they fired their wing mounted ordnance, sending thirty of the deadly new supersonic cruise missiles streaking away and climbing for the stars above. They would more than double their launch altitude before they tipped their noses over at apogee and began to seek the distant American battlegroup. Thirty supersonic kamikaze missiles would soon be heading south to find the American carrier. By the time they descended for their final plunging attack run they would be coming at over Mach-5, their noses glowing red with the heat of the friction in the atmosphere… and they would not be alone.

A bastion of attack submarines were off to the south, now entering cruise missile range of the American task force. Three *Akula* Class attack submarines were spread out in the vanguard, forming a screen against intruding enemy subs. Their job was simply to find and attack any enemy submarine attempting to penetrate the screen and threaten the next group of SSGNs. Two older *Oscar* Class subs were following them, the *Omsk* and *Viluchinsk*. They carried some vintage cruise missiles, each with twenty-four of the old P-700 *Granit* "Shipwreck" missiles. With a range just over 600 kilometers and a heavy 750 kg warhead they posed a grave threat.

Behind them came the pride of the Russian undersea fleet, the new *Yasen* class boat, SSGN *Kazan*. Here were no less than forty P-900 "Sizzler" cruise missiles, fast sea skimmers with a high speed terminal run programmed for dizzying evasive maneuvers.

Karpov counted down the seconds, knowing his *Backfires* had their missiles in the air by now, and holding his breath as the time ticked off. He wanted to give his missile fire order to the sub bastion to coordinate the time on target as closely as possible for each weapon system involved. He had worked out his initial attack the previous evening, laboring late into the night to check and double check each detail of the plan. He had even coded everything into discrete message transmissions to be sent at crucial intervals as the action unfolded. The time was now.

"Nikolin! Send low frequency transmission undersea Order One as programmed."

"Sir, aye, sending undersea transmission one."

If all went according to plan there would soon be a salvo of twenty of the slower P-900s from *Yasen*, half of the boat's missile arsenal. Undersea Order Two would send twenty-four of the faster P-700 cruise missiles from the two *Oscar* class boats leaping from the sea like a school of angry flying fish and skimming right over the wave tops toward the American carriers. These forty-four low altitude missiles would be added to the thirty KH-32s off the *Backfires*, soon to be falling like meteors from the edge of space.

Karpov looked at his watch, then glanced up at the ship's chronometer, mentally calculating something in his battle mind. The American strike planes were almost at the AEW line and closing, about 400 kilometers out. Rodenko reported multiple contacts inbound, with data fed by Black Bear, but that plane had but seconds to live. He had to act at once.

"Rodenko! Feed AEW data to Samsonov at once to fix the position of the American strike groups. When we lose Black Bear switch to predictive plot. We know where they are headed and our systems can calculate their course and speed easily enough. Sound air defense alert and signal all fleet units! Samsonov, I want the S-400s ready, four salvos of eight. Concentrate your fire on the Alpha strike group coming in from the Hokkaido coast. *Kuznetsov's* fighters will handle the Beta strike group."

Rodenko was quick to comply and Samsonov soon had good live targeting data on the planes coming in off the coast of Japan. They would lose the contact soon enough until the ship re-acquired them with her own radars, but the computers would continue to project a predictive plot based on the last live course heading and speed they had obtained. The S-400s would be keyed to intercept based on that plot until their active radar could redefine the precise location and home in. The Captain was going to deliver yet another surprise, for the Americans would not expect SAM defense for some minutes, until they were inside the 300 kilometer range of his older S-300s. But the new S-400s had an extended range to 400 kilometers, and they could fire at once.

Captain Tanner wanted to try his patience that morning, and he would now pay the price. Rodenko turned to Samsonov and nodded. Karpov gave the order to fire and the missile warning sounded as the first of the S-400s were up and away. Like an old veteran returning to the front, wounded, bandaged and yet resolute, *Kirov* was at war.

* * *

Far to the South Captain Tanner got the bad news soon enough. He was sitting in the Captain's chair on the bridge of CVN *Washington*, and about to have a very bad day. His AWACS coverage soon reported the *Backfire* strike group, but they had fired from well beyond 600 kilometers.

"Deaken!" He wanted his weapons specialist. "What's coming at us off those damn *Backfires?* They're over 800 klicks out!"

"Can't be throwing the kitchen sink at us at that range," said Deaken. He was referring to the KH-22 "Kitchen" missile with a maximum range of 600 kilometers. "Has to be something new—probably the KH-32."

"Well, what about it?""

"World of pain, sir. High angle attack. Sucker climbs to the upper edge of the atmosphere, acquires, and then dives on the target."

"Just what I didn't need to hear."

"Sir!" Deaken had just picked up another missile launch warning from the AWACS. "We've got multiple missiles inbound, 300 klicks out. Those have to be off subs!"

"Well where the hell is our screen?"

Skip Patterson was at the Captain's side and the XO had a serious look on his face. "That bastard stole a march on us, sir."

Tanner leaned back, shaking his head. "All's fair in love and war, Skip. This guy Karpov thought things out real good. He knew we were reneging on that deal an hour ago and he had a sub missile group right on the AEW line ready to bushwhack us. Where are our boats, damnit?"

"They probably had them on sonar sir, but the kill orders just went out. The Russkies just beat us to the punch, but they'll be after those subs now. Bet on it."

"A lot of good it does us now, Mister Patterson. They got their shot off, and that's all that matters. The *Backfires* were another surprise. Every drill we've ever run had them launching inside 600 klicks. Alright people," Tanner raised his voice. "It's about to get ugly. Better hope *Shiloh* and the boys on those DDGs are on their game today. We've drilled this for years, but this is the real McCoy. Signal all units—weapons free. Prosecute, prosecute, prosecute."

"Aye sir, all units track and prosecute vampires. AWACs has the sub surface launches still in booster phase. We should get them on the SPY system at tip-over when they hit our radar horizon." The US AEGIS defense

system was about to get its first real war test, and the SPY-1D/3D radar would be the first shipborne system to pick the missiles up as they tipped over after the initial boost and then descended to their low level sea skimming altitudes for the target approach.

“How fast are these new ALCMs, Deke?” Tanner was trying to calculate his kill chain probabilities here.

“The KH-32s? Very fast, sir. They’ll be humming at Mach 5 when they hit our radar horizon and at least Mach 3.5 if they make a low level run after that. We’ll have one good shot, maybe two at that speed. Double that for the *Sizzlers* because they run subsonic until the final approach. And we can beat on the older *Shipwrecks* all day. They’re fast, but with a radar cross section that big we’ll lock and track them easily enough. We’ll only get a couple shots at them, but one should do.”

The air launched missiles were going to be the real problem, thought Tanner. Anything coming in at that speed reduced the defensive SAMs reaction time to the bare minimum. They had to acquire, track, engage and prosecute that contact, and they may only get a few good shots at a missile that fast, perhaps only one. A few seconds later they got word their AEGIS Cruiser *Shiloh* was already firing.

“Hell they took a pot shot at those KH-32s with the RIM-161s, sir!” That was the Standard Missile 3, designed for intercepting ballistic missiles. It had the range to even leave the atmosphere and get up after satellites if necessary, and *Shiloh* was sending a barrage up to see if they could thin the soup on those *Backfire* launched cruise missiles. To make the shot the AEGIS system was relying on data from the AWACS, as the incoming missiles had not reached the ship’s radar horizon yet. It was a proverbial ‘long shot’ but a good play. Tanner just hoped to God it would help him, but he knew that, with over seventy missiles inbound, something was bound to get through.

His battlegroup was not tightly concentrated. He had destroyers *Lassen* and *McCampbell* out on ASW Screen, *Wilbur*, *McCain* and *Fitzgerald* in the inner screen, and CGN *Shiloh* was in tight.

I should have waited for *Nimitz*, he thought. That damn Flash-Z traffic forced me to take immediate action against my better judgment, but no one will know or care much about that when this is over and done. If this old girl gets hit, the only thing that will make the news cycle is the smoke and fire. I’ve got 80% of my aircraft aloft, with most of those heading north to send our *Harpoons* Karpov’s way within the hour. Let’s hope we’ve got a deck

here for them to come home. Otherwise they'll have to land in Japan.

The "war" as it would now be called in all seriousness, was only a matter of minutes away, coming at him in seventy-four screaming anti-ship missiles.

Chapter 23

And it was coming fast.

The KH-32s were going to be a little ahead of the game. Climbing to the dizzying height of 44 kilometers, they quickly acquired the American carrier battlegroup and began their descent. The attack profile was one a ballistic missile might take, though it was deemed ‘semi-ballistic’ in naval circles. It still spelled deadly any way you worded it, and the thirty missiles were diving at Mach-5. Rising to the challenge, CG *Shiloh* was sending one SM-3 after another up for the chase.

The radar picked up the incoming missiles easily enough, and the enhanced infrared seeker was quick to refine the target data. Even if the missile did boast of a stealthy approach there was no way to hide the heat generated by the incredible speed of the KH-32s. The SM-3 attack was like trying to hit a bullet with a bullet, as it relied on a strike to kill by kinetic impact. When it did hit, however, it did so with the force of a ten ton Mack truck moving at 600 miles per hour. As the missiles climbed, their attitude and course were corrected by precise, short propulsion bursts, an improvement in the latest block of the Raytheon designed missile.

All the corporate sales talk about ‘a more flexible, capable, and cost-effective architecture, improved sensor technologies, and a variety of options to detect and track enemy missiles was now about to be put to the test. It would be a test unlike any other ever run for the missile, which had a good track record in one-on-one engagements under well controlled conditions, but this was the real thing. It wasn’t a test with a missile platform quietly waiting for a target, knowing its timing and approach vector from the start. This time it was thirty missiles all at once, and there was only one catch—*Shiloh* had only 24 of the SM-3s in inventory, and three of the destroyers had only 12 each. Normal protocol was to fire two missiles at each incoming target. They would barely have enough.

The KH-32s were also getting an assist from another Russian AWACS plane. The A-50s on the AEW line were presumed to be expendable assets if war actually broke out. When Black Bear went down in flames, the Russians were quick to activate their newest addition of the airborne surveillance fleet,

the A-100. The plane was built on the capable workhorse of the IL-476 airframe, and upgraded with new advanced AESA radars. It had better loiter time, extended detection range, and resistance to jamming. Positioned behind *Kuznetsov's* fighter screen, its life span was more secure, and it was now giving an able assist to the missiles in order to vector them in on their targets. Ignoring the outer destroyer screens, they were after the heart of the American task force, AEGIS Cruiser *Shiloh* and CVN *Washington*.

Eighteen SM-3s were in the air already, and *Shiloh* was pouring it on, her deck and superstructure awash with white and amber smoke as the angry fire of the missiles' exhaust rocketed them skyward. Anxious crews aboard the ship were watching the radar screens and tracking the engagement. The SM-3s were performing as advertised. They got one, then three of the incoming KH-32s, and the hot race to get the others was intense. After seven kills operators on *Shiloh* were encouraged until they saw that three missiles were now well below the expected kill altitude from this initial barrage. Three, then five, then seven were through the SM-3 salvo, their incredible speed making a direct hit a very tough prospect. Nine of their brothers had died to penetrate this outer envelope, and a second wave of SM-3s were still engaging the remaining fourteen missiles there, but these lucky seven were now on their way in to the target. *Shiloh* would have but one last slim chance to get them.

The RIM-162 ESSM (Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile) was that last chance. It had improved range and agility and came four missiles to a cell in a VLS 'Quad Pack' on the forward deck. The missiles had seen numerous test firings over the years, swiping target drones from the sky, and defeating slower subsonic anti-ship missiles like the Beech AS-34 Kormoran. The ESSM was designed specifically to deal with supersonic missiles with evasive maneuver capability. Yet design is one thing, testing another and the heat and intensity of real warfare quite another indeed. These were not Kormorans or target drones, nor were they supersonic—they were true hypersonic missiles coming in at nearly 4000 miles or 6500 kilometers per hour. They could cover their entire active range of 1000 kilometers in about ten to twelve minutes accounting for extra time needed in the initial boost phase. Now they were deadly meteors, five times faster than anything the *Sparrows* had been sent to track and kill before. Twelve missiles were fired from *Shiloh's* broiling foredeck, but only three found targets in the precious few seconds before the incoming missiles got into the hot zone. Four KH-32s

were going to get through. One would miss, spoofed by countermeasures, three would hit and the battle would shift dramatically on that score alone.

Shiloh took one missile amidships, between the two prominent box-like superstructures that house the valuable radars. The warhead packed a considerable wallop on its own, but the additional kinetic impact imparted by speed was tremendous. It sheared through the mast there destroying the ship's electro-optical sighting system, the AN/SPS 49 system, and then penetrated the superstructure until it had nearly blown completely through the bottom hull. Black hell was at the center of the ship, which shuddered under the impact, the central mast toppling over the side and into the sea. It was a bulls eye hit, near fatal, and it was going to quickly take *Shiloh* out of the game for the next crucial minutes when the ship lost power while emergency crews and engineers were scrambling from undamaged sections to fight the intense fire.

Aboard CVN *Washington*, Tanner saw what happened, his jaw slack as the massive column of dark black smoke and fire bloomed at the center of his primary air defense escort.

"Holy God! One got through. Will you look at *Shiloh!"* Before he had his field glasses up there came a hard jolt and the sound of an explosion, much closer, as two windows shattered on the main bridge. Tanner whirled about to see the number one elevator forward of the island erupt in fire and smoke, an FA-18 *Superhornet* smashed to pieces, a segment of its wing spinning wildly along the flight deck to collide with a waiting helicopter. The damage extended into the elevator shaft and well below to the hanger decks where there was a major fire underway in seconds. Then the second missile hit, smashing into his forward deck and tearing a segment from the front of his ship near the bow. The KH-32 had penetrated three decks deep into crew living spaces, but thankfully most everyone who might have been there was at some other duty.

"Son-of-a-*bitch!"* said Tanner. "We should have had *Antietam* in tight with us. One damn AEGIS can't handle a saturation barrage like this."

"It isn't over," said XO Skip Patterson darkly. "The pickets are engaging the sea skimmers now. We've still got over forty vampires inbound."

"Well have a good look at *Shiloh*." Tanner gestured to the ship on his near horizon, wreathed in smoke.

"It's up to the pickets," said Patterson, and anything our air cover can throw at them."

Wilbur, *McCain* and *Fitzgerald* were having a field day in the inner screen with their RIM-156 SM-2 medium range SAMs. The missiles were developed with inertial guidance so all three ships could share illumination radars to better defend against saturation missile attacks. They were Flight I construction, and did not have the enhanced *Sea Sparrows* that had been installed on ships beginning with Flight IIA, but *McCain* had been refitted with the newer RIM-174 ERAM extended range missile, sometimes called the "Standard Missile 6."

Against the big Russian P-700s, the American missiles were more than adequate, and the three destroyers in Tanner's inner screen were getting the job done. Excited crewmen aboard *Wilbur* reported one kill after another as their SAMs found and took down the lumbering missiles. But then one got through—the *only* one that got through out of the entire barrage of twenty-four missiles off the two *Oscar* class subs. One of the 25mm chain guns got a piece of it, but *Wilbur* got wacked with the rest. With 750 kilograms of penetrating explosive warhead at the tip of a missile over thirty feet long and weighing 15,400 pounds, the ship took a tremendous hit.

It had been a very long time since the last casualty of a sea skimming anti-ship missile against a ship of this size had been logged during the Falkland War. DD *Sheffield* was struck amidships, burned, and eventually sunk by an *Exocet* in 1982. USS *Stark* had also been hit by two such missiles in 1987 and managed to survive the attack. But the *Exocet* was a featherweight champion, weighing only 1500 pounds. The *Shipwreck* that struck *Wilbur* was a true heavyweight, weighing ten times more, with a warhead that was 4.5 times bigger and moving twice as fast. *Wilbur* would not survive. The hull was ripped open, flame and fire gutting the ship in an enormous explosion that sent the vessel careening onto its starboard side, immolated and shrouded in thick black smoke.

The *Shipwreck* had been very well named.

There was a brief interval of quiet, a precious few seconds in all, and then the alert warning was shouted again on the bridge of CVN *Washington*.

"Here come the *Sizzlers*," said Patterson, the Russian P-900s that *Kirov* had battered the navies of WWII with were now in their own league, against opponents they had actually been designed to fight and kill—and they were doing that job with lethal efficiency. There were only twenty coming in the barrage off *Kazan* but, after a slow, subsonic approach, they descended to the wave tops and began a dizzying dance of evasive maneuvers while

accelerating to Mach 2.5.

Tanner heard the battle traffic on the radio, his jaw tight as the frantic calls came in. *Lassen* in the outer screen had taken a KH-32, the last to get through *Shiloh's* brave defense before the cruiser was hit. It was followed soon after by a P-900, and the destroyer was down for the count. *McCampbell* took a *Sizzler* aft, its helo deck afire and inoperable now. The two destroyers had been out sprinting and drifting on ASW picket, and now that defensive line was fairly well compromised. *McCampbell* would survive the hit and continue providing some forward defense, but *Lassen* was out of the fight. *McCain* and *Fitzgerald* were both unscathed, still maintaining an adequate inner screen.

Eight *Sizzlers* tried for the prize and bored in on *Washington*, but the flattop was not without defensive teeth of its own. It fired twelve RIM-24 Sparrows, and the combined defense took down five of the eight vampires in a stunning duel off the starboard side of the ship. The RIM-116 Rolling Airframe close in missiles on the carrier got two more, but the last missile made it through the gauntlet of hissing SAMs.

Tanner saw it coming, heard the chatter of his last ditch Phalanx CWIS systems, but the missile skipped away like a skilled boxer. He was transfixed by its approach just as the British, Italians and finally the Japanese had stood spellbound by the deadly, seductive dance. Then it ended with fire. The missile struck dead amidships, penetrated the hull and started a second fire below decks near the number two elevator.

When it was finally over, ten of the seventy-four missiles had punched through the SAM umbrella, one missed, but nine others struck five ships, with the carrier taking three significant hits. Yet US carriers had been born from the cauldron of war in the Pacific long ago. *Washington* was a massive ship, well over a 100,000 tons, and her design drew upon the hard experience gained in WWII. All the main hangers were segmented in to three fire bays, each separated by thick steel bulkheads and fire doors that would could be closed to contain the damage in any one given area. The crews were well trained and expert at damage control. They would get the upper hand in time, and the damage to the forward deck was close enough to the bow that it would not yet impede flight operations. CVN *Washington* would live on to continue the fight, just as so many of her ancestors had taken hits and fought on in the last great war.

Like two men fighting a measured duel, Karpov had fired first and hit his

enemy square in the shoulder, but the offensive might of the American battlegroup was already airborne before his salvos struck home, and now the Russian fleet would face the wrath of three experienced naval air strike squadrons.

It was just the beginning.

* * *

Aboard *Kirov* Karpov listened intently as Rodenko reported on the battle, his fist tightening with each apparent hit. Nine hits in all, he thought. Twelve percent! That was an exceptionally good tally, but he was not yet certain of the real damage he had inflicted on his enemy. His opponent's left hook, coming in over the coast of Hokkaido, was now being engaged by his S-400 SAMs, and he hoped the new missiles would do their job.

Samsonov sent up four salvos of eight missiles each, half the entire inventory on the big long range missiles. The American planes were still in formation, cruising at about 1400kph as they made their approach. *Kirov* fired at a range of 450 kilometers knowing the that would diminish as the missiles and planes approached one another. The S-400 accelerated to the eye popping speed of Mach 12 in the first 22 seconds after launch. At the half minute mark they acquired the incoming strike packages and began to register and home in on targets.

The US pilots saw them coming on radar, surprised that the enemy would fire this early. Flight Lt. Cap Anson leading in the *Royal Maces* heard chatter from the Vipers, the F-16s from the 13th Squadron *Panthers* out of Misawa up front on escort.

"Somebody jumped the gun! I've got vampires coming up at eleven-o-clock. Damn fast!"

"Roger that, Lucky Thirteen," said Anson "Wasn't expecting company for another five minutes. Must be nerves. Russkies haven't been to a real dance for decades."

Anson knew better than that. If the Russians fired they had the range to do so. This had to be an advanced missile, probably one of the newer SA-21 *Growlers*, the NATO reporting name for the S-400 *Triumf*. He keyed his Squadron comm-link. "Ready on ECM and open up the throttles, gentlemen. Here comes our fifteen minutes of fame!" It was going to take them that long to reach firing range on the enemy fleet targets, and they would be tangling

with these advanced SAM defenses the whole way in.

Yet they were now committed. This was the strong left hook of Tanner's strike plan. The *Vipers* of the 13th would lead, and their Scalable Agile Beam Radar (SABR) in the nose of the plane was giving them a good look at what they were facing—salvos of lightning fast missiles coming at amazing speeds. Lt. Col Kurt Brillings was in the lead, dubbed the "Brillo Pad" for the way he would scrub the skies clean of aggressor fighters in training—but these were not fighters.

"Take aim, gentlemen!" he called to his squadron mates. "Fox Two!" The Russian SAMs were fast—too fast—and had closed too quickly. The entire run of the missile out to its maximum range would be completed in just 100 seconds, a minute and a half, with no time for idle chat on the part of the defenders. Brillo was firing now while he still could, and using his more agile AIM-9 *Sidewinders* that would home on infrared. Anything moving at Mach 12 in the sky would be hot as a meteor. The rest of the squadron followed suit and seconds later they were breaking left and right for evasive maneuvers, as the P-400s came howling in to the attack.

'Dandy Randy' was the first to die, Captain Randal Brooks would not be returning to Misawa. An S-400 found his plane in a high speed turn, pivoted, and closed with four times the velocity of the fighter to strike it head on. The broiling explosion lit up the azure blue of the sky with orange fire. The *Sidewinders* got to two of the first salvo of eight SAMs, the remaining six detonated close enough to targets that their withering fragmentation warheads sent a hail of shrapnel through wings and windshields within twenty meters. Four other F-16s went down with Brooks, but the others evaded or spoofed the last three missiles. It was a high cost to pay, and the *Vipers* bore the brunt of that salvo. Now the SEAD support group of eight F/A-18s with radar seeking HARM missiles were next in line.

Behind them came the strike package of twelve *Superhornets* with four harpoons each, and a Growler on standoff trying to jam the enemy radar. Thanks to the presence of the F-16s, all the planes that would have normally flown TARCAP assignments were re-designated for strike. This baker's dozen were the hard fist of the left hook in Tanner's attack, but they had nine more minutes of hell ahead of them before they could get close enough to fire.

Chapter 24

Captain Tanner was in his own ‘Situation Room,’ the Flag Plot for his strike group on the wounded carrier *Washington*. The electronics had been upgraded with the latest flat panel displays indicating the positions of every ship in the immediate region, with a host of arcane symbols used to indicate aircraft aloft, from the strike groups he had bearing north to the support assets like AEW and air refueling tankers, their positions indicated by telltale race tracks in phosphorescent green. Radar displays, a sonar watch team, and numerous comm panels were attended by midshipmen and operations specialists of every stripe. He was patched in to the CAG, the Air Boss, his Damage Control Chief, the Tactical Action Officer and the OOD up on the main bridge. His XO Skip Patterson was at his side.

“One hell of a mess,” said Tanner. “They sucker punched us square in the face.”

Patterson nodded grimly. “We’re naked out here at the moment, sir. *Shiloh* has restored power and propulsion but is still fighting fires amidships. And she’s fired all her SM-3s anyway. The Russians send any more of those ALCMs at us and we’re history. Out in the screen, *Lassen* is going to have to be towed and *McCampbell* is fishing *Wilbur’s* crew out of the water with swift boats. They lost their aft helo deck and all the ASW assets on both ships have had to divert to Japan. We’ve no ASW coverage on the outer screen now. On the inner screen, *Wilbur* took two hits and I’m afraid we’re going to lose her.”

“And we took three,” Tanner folded his arms, shaking his head with disgust. “We were too damn thin with our close in SAM coverage.”

“AEGIS was always front man in the game, sir,” said Patterson.

“Well it wasn’t enough, damnit. Now I’ve got a bloody nose up front and two elevators good for little more than scrap metal.”

“That bug on the number one lift got slammed pretty good. They’re clearing the wreckage there now, but Chief Wilson says we might be able to get the number two elevator functional again. This new Russian missile packs one hell of a wallop. Fires are out but there’s a fifteen foot hole on our starboard side near that number one elevator, and the missile penetrated over forty feet deep. Thank our lucky stars the fire doors were closed.”

“Alright, let Chief Wilson sort out the hanger deck. We need to regroup. We’re spread too thin. As soon as *McCampbell* has completed her rescue operation I want her to take *Lassen* in tow and head south to rejoin big George here. She may not be able to run helo operations but we can, and *McCampbell* can coordinate the USW delousing operation if we position her correctly. All we need now is for some rust bucket of a sub out there to get lucky and slip inside while our guard is down. As for *McCain* and *Fitzgerald*, we’ll need them in tighter until *Antietam* gets here.”

“*Antietam* sir? Isn’t she assigned to the Admiral’s command ship?”

“At the moment, but as you can see, it was a mistake for us to leave *Antietam* down south with *Blue Ridge.* Now that *Shiloh’s* hurting we’ll need her here as well.”

“Very well, sir, but Admiral Stone will be the devil to pay.”

“Stone? He can sit down there issuing orders all day if he wants, but it’s my ass in the sling out here on the duty line. Stone still has *Stetham* and *Mustin*, and that’s more than he needs down south for my money. Make the request. Be polite, but firm. We need *Antietam* up here on the double. If the Russkies get off another one two punch like that we could be the first carrier sunk since the last war, and I don’t want my name in the history books on that score, or my ass in the god damn drink. Get it done, Skip.”

“Sir, Aye, Aye.”

Patterson knew just what to say.

Tanner folded his arms on his broad chest, eyes playing over the big wall panel displays. “Our boys should be bringing the heat up north in another five minutes,” he said glancing at the chronometer. “This Karpov is the real devil to pay, XO. He can dish it out pretty damn good, but now let’s see if he can take it.”

* * *

The S-400s had taken down six F-16s and two SEAD planes, and now the last salvo of eight was up after the *Royal Maces*. Their combined defensive fire was only good enough to get three of the speedy SAMs and five got through. In the wheeling dance of evasive turns and countermeasures, three of the twelve strike planes were hit. Yet it wasn’t over. *Varyag* was also carrying sixty-four S-300s, and that ship had followed up *Kirov’s* barrage with thirty two more of the deadly SAMs. Their speed and 300 kilometer

range were now proving to be formidable. When a missile of that speed obtained a hard radar lock it was very difficult to shake it off, if not impossible. Two more planes in the SEAD group went down, leaving four to fire their radar seekers in a desperate attempt to suppress the target's acquisition radar systems, but their range was limited—that was becoming the salient difference in the engagement. The US missiles were good, but they had short legs. The American planes were forced to fly through a SAM envelope 200 to 300 kilometers deep before the F/A-18s could get in range to launch their *Harpoons*. Now they were learning just how good the Russian missiles were, and how valuable the assets of speed and long range were in combat, and it hurt.

By the time the strike wave was in close enough to launch, there were seven of twelve strike planes left. They had endured what the Japanese had faced, pressing on in the heat of the intense engagement, watching their buddies wheel in desperate attempts to evade the lethal SAMs, hearing their last words as they shouted and cursed the enemy they were facing. But seven got through to fire, and within seconds the sky was scored by the thin fuming rocket trails of twenty-eight *Harpoons*.

Fired at altitude like this, the missiles quickly descended to the deck. They weren't fast at 860kph, nor were they particularly stealthy. But they were dogged, low flying lances that would be difficult to track and kill. The S-400 and S-300 systems were not going to be agile enough to get at them down on the deck. If a missile got through it would hit with a 500 pound warhead, nowhere near the wallop of the heavier Russian missiles, but more than enough to damage or disable a modern ship.

Aboard *Kirov* Rodenko saw the incoming barrage and informed Karpov. The ship and crew were ready at air defense action stations and within seconds *Kirov's* medium range system dubbed the SA-N-92 by NATO was firing. The crab like *Kashtan* CIWS and 30mm chain guns were also armed and ready.

Two *Udaloy* class destroyers were in the first defensive screen, *Marshal Shaposhnikov* and *Admiral Vinogradov*. Once called Russia's answer to the US *Arleigh Burke* class destroyer, they were in no way worthy of that claim. These were *Udaloy I* class ships, optimized for ASW duty, though they did carry both the SA-N-9 Gauntlet system, the earlier version of the same weapon *Kirov* was firing. Together they lit off a barrage with everything they had, eight missiles each. *Kirov* was the heart of the medium range defense,

however with 128 upgraded missiles. It had more raw firepower than all four of the *Udaloy* destroyers in escort, and then some, but the destroyer Captains knew they were the screen and weren't going to just sit there waiting for the American missiles to arrive. The barrage was thick enough to thin the soup a bit and when the *Harpoons* began their terminal approach to the fleet, there were eighteen left.

"Switching to *Kashtan* system at ten kilometers," said Samsonov as Karpov looked on. There was much more tension in the room now. Those last mass attacks by the Japanese had raised more than a few hairs on the back of the crew's necks, but this was something altogether different. The missiles were three to four times faster than the planes they had faced, and they were locking on with active radar. The electronics were so good the Russian jammers had no appreciable effect on the *Harpoons*. We've got range, mass, speed, thought Karpov, but they've got top notch electronics. We'll see which side prevails.

Out in the screen brave *Shaposhnikov* fired its own CADS-N-1 *Kashtans*, missiles streaking away and skipping down towards the sea as they acquired the *Harpoons*. The cruiser *Varyag* got into it with a salvo of OSA-M missiles as well, and the skies above the turbulent sea were soon a spaghetti of missile wakes as they danced away to find targets—and find them they did. Eleven more *Harpoons* were swatted down by the close in missile defense barrage, and now the mini-guns were spitting fire and steel at the oncoming survivors, their hot barrels spinning furiously as the 9000 round magazine fed them shells. They got four more harpoons, but the final three were going to cross the finish line and find targets.

Admiral Vinogradov was hit first on her aft quarter and then on the number two deck gun when one of the *Harpoons* executed a popup maneuver and slammed the forward deck. The one two punch wracked the ship from bow to stern, and it was soon enveloped in thick black smoke. The last *Harpoon* was heading for *Kirov*, but in the heat of the action the *Varyag* had put on thirty knots and moved out off the big battlecruiser's starboard side. Now her Captain Myshelev executed a high speed turn and drove his ship right into the path of the oncoming missile, heroically sacrificing his cruiser to protect the fleet flagship.

The bridge crew were awed by the maneuver, elated at first until they saw the explosion on the cruiser's bow. Had the ship been quicker the missile would have struck her loaded missile tubes, arrayed in four sets of two on

each side of the ship. As it was, the *Harpoon* struck the hull above the water line and blew right through the narrow angled bow.

Karpov grimaced when he saw the hit, though he knew the missile had not struck a vital spot. There would be a fire, casualties, but the ship would survive. He was soon on the radio to assess the situation.

"Falling on your sword, Myshelev?"

"Someone had to take the hit," Myshelev's gritty voice came back. He was a career officer that Karpov knew and respected, heavy set, gruff, and a hard taskmaster at sea. *"Don't worry, we'll have the damage controlled in fifteen minutes. Most of the explosive force went right through the bow! We've got a broken nose to go with the one I already have, but we got lucky today."*

"We'll toast you at officer's mess," said Karpov. Then his voice lowered to a more serious tone. "No more heroics, my friend. I need your *Vulkans*. Can you execute Long Arm?"

"Ready and able, Captain. Just say when."

Karpov smiled. He had no idea what was happening with his submarine bastion. The boats had all gone silent after their initial barrage. They had orders to sprint to a new location, but he knew that American subs were out there as well, and the hunt was on. Fleet HQ Fokino had messaged him to indicate a second squadron of bombers was on the way, compliments of Admiral Leonid Volsky, but Karpov looked at his watch, knowing it could be another forty five minutes before the bombers were in position.

"What's happening on our other flank, Rodenko?"

"Two squadrons off the American carrier are mixing it up with *Kuznetzov's* fighter screen, sir. The fighting is intense! We've lost eight Mig-29s, but we hurt them as well. If anything gets through, they could be in firing position in twenty minutes."

"Then we fire first," Karpov said firmly. "How far away is that American carrier?"

"I'm reading its position at about 512 kilometers from the satellite data link, sir."

Karpov turned to the communications officer. "Mister Nikolin, signal fleet message 'Long Arm One.' Execute at zero 10:40."

"Aye, sir. Messaging all fleet units."

He really only had to message two ships, *Varyag* and *Kuznetsov* farther north. They were the only fleet assets with the reach to fire and hurt the

enemy now at this range. The carrier was packing twelve P-700 Granit *Shipwreck* missiles with a range of 625 kilometers. *Varyag* had the last of the P-1000 *Vulkans*, the only ones remaining in service on a surface ship now, sixteen big missiles that could reach out 700 kilometers.

The Russians had parried the American left thrust over Hokkaido, largely through the effectiveness and range of their long range SAMs. Now *Kuznetsov's* fighters were embroiled in the fight, a strong shield holding off the other two American squadrons. Karpov knew the two groups had planned to time their strike together, but the attack had come unhinged, like a fighter who had tried to follow that left with a big right hand, but it was blocked. It was time to counterpunch.

The minutes ticked away. They watched *Varyag* bravely turn and point her crumpled bow at the distant horizon where the enemy waited. Then the missiles began to fly, long white javelins launching from angled firing tubes on either side of the cruiser. They fired in pairs, two at a time, their wings deploying after ejection and engines roaring with anger as they sped away. Developed in the late 1980s, little was known about the *Vulkan* for many years. In fact, NATO was not even aware that it had secretly been deployed on Russian surface ships. Now it made its debut in combat for the very first time before slipping into the mists of obsolescence, the last of the Mohicans.

The titanium nose of the missile was slim and long, and housed an *Argon* system radar that allowed it to scan and select specific targets, with a bias toward big lumbering carriers. Behind this was a 1000kg warhead, big enough to do some serious damage, and one of the largest conventional warheads on any anti-ship missile in service. It came from the Soviet mindset where longer, bigger and faster was deemed better, and it was all three, nearly 10,000 pounds of murder on wings, with bad intent. As the salvo completed, one of the sixteen missiles would rise as leader, using its altitude to acquire the distant target. It would pass this data on to the other fifteen at lower altitude, and if this missile were taken out, another would automatically rise to the position of salvo leader as the attack progressed.

Behind the *Vulkans* came the P-700 *Shipwrecks*, fat supersonic flying busses that had already challenged the American Task force when fired by the *Oscars*. Karpov was sending a nice concentrated barrage of twenty-four missiles at the Americans to keep them dancing while he dealt with their final thrust against his fleet coming in from the east.

Then it happened. Another Vulkan got into the fray on the high peak at

the northern tip of Iturup Island. SVERT, the Sakhalin Volcanic Eruption Response Team began to register intense seismic activity at 10:40 hours. The Demon had slumbered for 10,000 years in a quiet glacial valley, and no one knew when it had last erupted. Yet over the centuries a massive pool of deep magma had migrated up towards the submerged caldera that formed the gap between the islands, and the area had been restless and grumbling in the last several years. Now the Demon awoke.

Another deep rumble was heard, and Karpov turned to look off his port quarter where the distant silhouette of the island could still be seen on the horizon some thirty kilometers away…until it exploded.

An enormous plume of fire and ash rose into the sky, larger than any eruption in the long island chain since the dawn of the present Holocene epoch, nearly 12,000 years ago. It was to be the largest eruption in recorded history, with fire and ash spewing from the 1.5 kilometer wide crater at the top then blowing it wide open. It was bigger than any geologist believed possible for this region, though they had not fully measured the huge magma chamber building for generations beneath the Kurile subduction zone. Other volcanoes of this type like Vesuvius, Krakatoa, Mt. St. Helens and Pinatubo had demonstrated the vast explosive potential of a stratovolcano. The Demon would trump them all, even besting the massive eruption of Mt. Tambora in 1815.

Karpov covered his ears as the raging sound of the explosive eruption intensified. They felt the ship roll with a blast wave, as though a massive nuclear detonation had ripped the top off the island volcano with an explosion exceeding 1000 megatons of TNT. The roar would be heard throughout all of Japan and Northern China as far away as Beijing, Taipei, and even Manila, over 2500 kilometers to the south. The broiling mass of ash and pumice was seared by tall geysers of molten lava cascading up and then down again to hiss into the boiling sea. Massive volcano bombs, rocks the size of a bus, were hurled up into the atmosphere, some falling like meteors as far as twenty or thirty kilometers away. A steaming red and black column of smoke would eventually climb to a height of fifty-seven kilometers and eject nearly fifty cubic miles of pyroclastic ash and pumice.

Rodenko stared at his radar screen and could not believe what he was seeing. They felt the ship shudder, as much from the wrenching sound as anything else, and Rodenko reported a large signal return wave approaching at nearly 500kph. Karpov turned his field glasses north and saw it coming, a

rise of seawater glistening in the morning sun, and all he could think of at that moment was the *Mississippi*, the old American battleship, the 'Black Lady' that he had swamped with a thousand feet of radiated ocean in the North Atlantic.

"All hands! Brace for heavy seas!" His voice seemed high and thin over the welter of sound and fury that was surging at them as the horizon itself seemed to rise up in a massive seething dome. And then the Demon showed its real face, and the whole northern tip of Iturup island, and much of the submerged caldera, exploded in a titanic upwelling of seawater and molten earth.

The shock wave was so powerful that it blew out windows in buildings as far away as Vladivostok, two days sailing time to the west. At Fokino headquarters Admiral Volsky was nearly thrown from his chair. He turned, awestruck, as he saw the angry red glow on the horizon and what looked like a massive mushroom cloud out where the fleet had deployed. His first thought was that the Americans had struck with nuclear weapons.

"My God," he breathed. "It's begun."

Day 3

“"Woe unto you, ye souls depraved!
Hope nevermore to look upon the heavens;
I come to lead you to the other shore,
To the eternal shades in heat and frost.”

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto III

Part IX

Hunter's Moon

"Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter."

— Ernest Hemingway, *On the Blue Water*

Chapter 25

Orlov sat in back the truck, thinking what he would do next. The flight east away from the Germans north of Kizlyar had been a quick rumble as the trucks sped along the hard packed earthen road. Half way to the coast, however, the good road ended, and they were forced to turn southeast along narrow tracks that fringed brown muddied fields. They crossed small streams over stone bridges that barely had the width to accommodate the vehicles, and the going was slow. The terrain forced them east towards the Caspian their way south blocked by a sprawling series of marshes, fen pools and salt barrens. Below this, the Terek River wandered lazily over the flat landscape, losing itself in many fingered runs into the marshland.

Orlov was watched by two guards, both with sub-machineguns, but he soon engaged them with his devil may care attitude, and even had one man laughing at one point, before the soldier steadied himself with a sergeant staring at him from the back of the truck bed. He had been all set to blow the Colonel who confronted him to hell; then the Germans attacked and everything became chaos. With six NKVD soldiers around him they were all hustled into a truck and on the road north, leaving a cloud of dust behind them—until they saw the armored cars advancing, with squads of German infantry on their flanks.

The column had to make a hard right turn and head east. The road to Astrakhan was now cut, at least for the time being. Now Orlov wondered what had become of his grandmother. That part of the column was also cut off, so it must have turned south, he reasoned. Good. We're all going south. The Germans did me a favor after all. Now all I have to do is figure how to bust a few heads, get hold of one of those machine guns and settle affairs here. That Sergeant is the only real threat. He's a sallow faced bastard, like all sergeants, eh? I'd better figure a way to get him closer. The others will be no problem.

"Hey… Tovarich, I've been to Baku already. Why in hell are we going back? I thought you were here to fight the Germans. They're behind us! Or are you sucking on that Colonel's teat, eh?"

"Watch your mouth," the Sergeant growled.

"You watch it, asshole!" Orlov was in no mood to be pushed any further

in spite of the circumstances. Amazingly, no one had searched him in the heat of the moment, and he still had the pistol in his pocket!

"Look," said the Sergeant. "We'll deal with you when we get down south." He pointed a threatening finger Orlov's way. "Nobody seems to know you, but you're wearing an NKVD uniform. What unit are you? What are these orders you say you have for the Commissar? Do you think we are stupid here?"

"No, I just think you *look* stupid," Orlov jibed. "I'll tell you why the Germans are kicking our ass in this war. Because we can't seem to sort out who we're fighting against! If it were me, I'd be back there in Kizlyar in a trench on the river line with the *fighting* NKVD, not out rounding up innocent girls and old ladies for Molla and his comrades. Which do you like, Sergeant—the little girls or the old babushkas? *That's* why we're losing this damn war, eh?"

The Sergeant waved him off, and craned his neck to look outside, but the look on his face told Orlov that last remark had hit a nerve. Orlov grinned, and he saw two of the other men suppress a smile as well.

They finally found the river, narrowing to no more than a hundred meters or so, a silty brown flow heading toward the sea. They followed the north bank for some time, but there were no bridges, so the trucks kept on. The dry land was slowly squeezed between the thinning stream of the river and the thickening marshes to the north. In time they came struggling along a narrowing track until the lead truck simply ground to a halt, its tires sunk deep in a bog. The column stopped, and Orlov heard the harsh voice of the Colonel up ahead, shouting orders. There was a rustle of men and equipment, the sound of women's voices mixed in, and then the Colonel stuck his head into the back of their truck.

"Out! We walk from here. The trucks can go no further. It's just a kilometer to the bridge at Kazgan. Then we'll find new vehicles on the other side. Keep a close eye on him," he pointed at Orlov, frowning. "He wants to see Comrade Molla? Very well, he will see him soon enough."

The Colonel meant that as a threat, but it gave Orlov heart. Good, he thought. They're taking me to Molla! What could be better? I've a revolver with six bullets in my pocket and all the time in the world.

He had the heady feeling that he was invulnerable, like a demigod that had fallen from the heavens into this world of stupid little men. He was omniscient as long as he kept hold of his service jacket and could listen to

Svetlana whispering in his earbuds. He could tell them what would happen tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. No man among them would believe him, though the sailors on the Soviet trawler, T-492 had learned to believe him. Too bad for Kamkov. He should have listened and gone below to get some sleep, but every man makes little decisions, little choices like that, and they sometimes make the difference between life and death.

He settled into the bench, a silent smirk on his face. What did these maggots know? They knew nothing! He would have to go about slapping them upside the head and straightening things out, or so he believed. And he would start with Commissar Molla.

* * *

The roads were much better south of the river than they were on the north bank. Captain John Haselden and his small commando team had humped it on foot for some time before they came to the river south of the town and decided to swim across. By the time they got to the other side they were tired, wet, and cold, but after edging down towards the outskirts of a hamlet denoted as Kurtanaul on their map, they found an old American Studebaker Lend-Lease truck that had been abandoned as lost. Sergeant Terry was familiar with them and managed to get it cranked up and running again after spending a half hour under the hood. It had just enough fuel left to get them the distance they would need to cover, if they could remain undetected.

The evening deepened to night and they decided to continue on while they could, using cover of darkness to get them as far east as possible. The map showed several small farms south of the river, and one decent road that ran east, eventually hugging the southern bank of the river. The bridge they were looking for was a little over forty kilometers from Kizlyar, and driving was slow on the muddied roads in the dark with headlights off. Thankfully, they encountered no one else on the journey, as most people in the thinly populated area were likely indoors for warmth and security by now. The night was theirs, and they reached the bridge site in good time, pulling the small truck off the road for concealment.

“We’ve been under a Hunter’s Moon all this way from Fort Shevchenko,” said Haselden. “Now it’s half worn away.” The half moon was now entering its last quarter, and would be sliced away to darkness night after night for the next week.

“The darker the better,” said Sutherland, smearing grease on his cheekbones under the eyes.

“They’ll be coming soon enough,” Haselden was certain. “We’re here a good two hours ahead of them by my reckoning.”

“Yes, Captain, but we’re just three men! There were nine trucks in that column. That’s could hold whole bloody company of NKVD.”

“They weren’t all soldiers. Lots of women and children were herded onto those trucks, just as we saw when we made that rush. The rest turned and ran south when Jerry showed up.”

“Well enough,” said Sutherland. “Then suppose they have two or three full squads. What then? We can bushwhack ‘em at this bridge here, but what good will that do? They’ll deploy to flank us and that will be the end of it.”

“These are good positions,” said Haselden. “Sergeant Terry on overwatch, the two of us on maneuver as before.”

“Terry is good on the Bren, but he won’t be able to keep three squads at bay for long.”

“If they have that many,” Haselden enjoined.

“I say we blow the bridge while we can,” Sutherland insisted. “Take that out and they’ll have to ford the river on foot, and the water is chest high. Then we might get them at a disadvantage in mid-stream and thin out the odds. They won’t be expecting an ambush like this.”

“Right, well don’t get trigger happy and put a bloody bullet through our man.” Haselden took a deep breath, looking tired and beset.

“What’s up, Jock? Under the weather?”

“Can’t say as I know,” said Haselden. “Feeling a bit stretched and thin is all. Nothing a good meal and a proper night’s sleep wouldn’t cure.”

“Same for us all,” said Sutherland.

But John Haselden was feeling something more that night, and thin and stretched was a good part of it. He had the odd feeling that something was strangely off its kilter, the world gone awry, and that it had something to do with him, though he could not put his finger on the problem.

Spread thin, that was it, like too little butter over bread, and no jam. The strange notion that he was not supposed to be here kept gnawing at the back of his mind, though he could not say why. Perhaps it was just this place, he thought. He should be way off south, back in Egypt where he felt at home in the heat and sand of the desert. This mess of a marshland seemed to chill his bones, even though the night was not all that cold. Yet, try as he might, he

could not shake the feeling that he was trespassing on ground he was never meant to tread. It was not the simple danger of an operation behind lines. That was his stock in trade. No. It was something else, but he could not get his fist around it, and it irked him in a quiet inner place where he held his thoughts close.

Haselden was a zombie, as Alan Turing might explain it, ill at ease in the land of the living souls in their primary lease on life. He should be dead and buried in that desert sand, killed in the raid on Tobruk that was cancelled to bring him here to this place. Operation Agreement had been stayed, and now he had some unknown pact with the cold hand of fate instead, and he could feel its clammy touch on the back of his neck. This mission, and this time, was another kind of Lend-Lease—a gift of time that kept him breathing the still night air, finger on the trigger of his 9mm Sten gun, boots in the mud as they sat there behind their cover, a man who should be dead, yet alive. He knew something of that on one level, a strange intuition that harried him and, as he watch the night eat at that Hunter's Moon these last several days he had the distinct feeling that it was eating away his own life and soul as well. He was feeling just like that old Studebaker truck, out of fuel, yet still on the road and pressed into service in dire need.

Haselden shook himself, rubbing a cramp from his shoulder. "Alright, Davey boy, let's have it your way. Get your charges set. I'll sit overwatch while you work."

"That's a good play, Jock." Sutherland wanted the bridge down and the river a good defensive barrier that he knew the Russians would have to try and cross if they wanted to get south. There was nothing north of them for miles and miles, so it was south or nothing for this column of NKVD and the rabble they had herded into those trucks. He nodded, clapping the Captain on that same stiff shoulder and tossing him some hardtack.

"Chew on that sea biscuit a while, Jock. It'll do you some good." Then he was off, haversack in one hand with demo charges as he began making a stealthy approach to the bridge. He was going to have to get wet again, but that was just par for this course. In a minute he was down under the bridge, fixing his charges and rolling back the wire, to a place of concealment. He knew that the moment he blew the charges the column would hear the explosion if they were close. He only hoped Haselden was correct and that they had a good two hour lead on the Russians.

His jaw set, he leaned forward on the plunger and heard the hard snap as

the signal triggered a firing pin. Then there was a sharp boom and the bridge went up. He used just enough explosive to knock down the center bridge support and leave a nice big hole there that no vehicle could get around on the narrow wood bridge. Then, when he was certain that there was no one near at hand, he went down to survey his work, nodding to himself with some small satisfaction. He didn't get wet again for nothing.

Back with Haselden the two men settled in to the cover to wait out the approach of the NKVD column. "You figure they heard that?"

"If they were within three miles, perhaps," said Haselden. "Otherwise I think we pulled it off without a hitch. Good show, Lieutenant."

"Just one for 30 Commando," said Sutherland with a smile. He pulled his service jacket a little tighter against the chill night air, glad he had removed it before he went into the river. It was the only thing he had that was dry now. "Say Jock," he said. "What's so special about this man Orlov?"

"You heard Seventeen in the briefing. They think he's off some bloody ship that's been giving the Navy fits in the Med. That's all I could make of it."

"Right…Well he says we're to bag this chap and bring him back whole, and at any cost, mind you. I'll not be indelicate to say that means you and me. We're expendable, and I don't know about you but I've grown rather fond of looking at myself in the mirror for a shave."

"And cracked more than a few with that mug of yours, Sutherland. It's the mission that matters; nothing else. When has it ever been any different, Davey? We're given a job and we do what we're told."

"Or die trying." Sutherland repeated Seventeen's admonishment when he handed them the mission. "Well if this Orlov is so important, you would think they might put a few more men on the job."

"That thought did cross my mind, but Seventeen says the up and ups want it done nice and quiet like. After all, we can't run about with a full company of the lads out here, can we. These are supposed to be our *allies*. So they picked you and me, Davey, and the good Sergeant Terry over there with his Bren." He nodded to Terry's position on the other side of the road where he had the best arcs of fire to cover the bridge.

"They want it done nice and quiet like." Sutherland shook his head, looking at his watch. "Maybe we'll get lucky and they they'll camp out and call it a night when they see my handiwork on that bridge, eh? Then we can put on the black face and creep on over to see what's up with this Orlov."

“Hush up!” Haselden was suddenly tense and alert. “You hear that?” They could hear the sound of voices in the distance.

They were coming.

Chapter 26

“Open that door!” The tall grey eyed man was adamant, pointing at the door, a suspicious look in his eye.

“But sir, that is just the upper landing for an old, unused stairway. It isn’t used any longer.”

“Someone is there, I tell you. I heard knocking on that door just a moment ago.”As if on cue there came another knock, soft and plaintive, and a muffled voice. The innkeeper’s eyes widened when he heard it, as though it was the ghostly hand of a specter knocking, and he was clearly distressed.

“Open it, I tell you! This is a matter of wartime security! I am giving you a direct order, and if you do not comply I will have military police commandeer this entire facility!”

Captain Ivan Volkov was not happy. He had traveled a very long way in the last few days, a long and frustrating journey in search of the man Kamenski had told him to find and shadow. He left the meeting with Inspector General Kapustin and the old Deputy Director of the KGB invigorated with a new mission. He was to find this former Lieutenant Navigator, Anton Fedorov, who had risen so dramatically in the ranks to the position of *Starpom* of the fleet’s finest ship—and this in just a few weeks time. It was unheard of! After their confrontation with the ship’s Captain over the clear discrepancies in their cover story, Volkov had been angered and amazed at Kapustin’s complete capitulation.

This business with the secret letter found in the Naval Logistics Building in Vladivostok was all a ruse, he thought. He allowed that bastard Karpov to walk all over him. Perhaps Kapustin had heard the rumors about Karpov and had come to fear him, as many others have during the Captain’s meteoric rise. But I’m not afraid of him. The outrageous story he foisted off to excuse these grievous transgressions did not impress me one bit. Karpov was hiding something all along, and I’m going to find out exactly what it is.

When he discovered the list of casualties and MIAs was completely bogus, he finally had the wedge he needed to confront the devious Captain. Then, the missing tactical nuclear warhead would become the icing on his cake. He would get Karpov one way or another now, of that he was certain.

Yet at the moment his mission was to find this upstart ex-navigator,

Fedorov. He had men shadowing him to the Primorskiy Engineering Center three nights ago. A group of men were seen leaving that building with a radiation safe container, and Volkov believed he knew what it contained—the missing nuclear warhead! He gave orders that the truck was to be followed, and was not surprised when he learned it was heading for the airport. His men had searched the Engineering Center that night to locate Fedorov, but he was not found. There were only so many ways to get anywhere from Vladivostok. If Fedorov was not with the group that went to the airport, then where was he? He was and clearly not aboard *Kirov*, which had left port hours before he was last seen.

He must have arranged some secret way out of the building that night, thought Volkov, or perhaps his men were too sloppy. He could be holed up in a safe house in Vladivostok right now, or he might have found a way to rendezvous with *Kirov* at sea. There were any number of possibilities, and Volkov had men working on every angle. In the meantime, he had orders to scour the Trans-Siberian rail, every depot, every station, and that is exactly what he was doing.

The route had taken him up through Khabarovsk and then west through Irkutsk. Thus far there had been no sign or trace of Fedorov—no ticketing information, no booking data at any hotel or inn along the route, and Volkov had his team of five security men check them all. He even had one man assigned to review the security camera footage at every station, but thus far no shadow of Fedorov had been seen.

Now he was getting angry, and his position as a Captain in the Naval Intelligence Division gave him enough clout to throw his weight around and cause a good deal of trouble. He could easily intimidate the menial servants in the civilian infrastructure, particularly as war seemed imminent now and military authority would soon trump all else. He had left Irkutsk early in the morning and was now just east of Krasnoyarsk, checking an old railway inn before rejoining the train at Ilanskiy. It had been a long and frustrating journey—until now.

Volkov had interviewed the proprietor, surveyed the lower level, and was up on the second floor checking each room. The innkeeper was not happy about this, but Volkov told him that he was seeking a dangerous man and had the full authority of the military behind him, determined. Then he heard what seemed like a rumbling sound, which seemed to produce a very worrisome reaction from the innkeeper.

“What was that?” he asked sharply.

“What? You mean that old plumbing? This is a very old inn, Captain. It was built before the first revolution. It does that all the time.”

Volkov pursed his lips, still suspicious. He knew men well. He had ferreted out every sort of weasel and gopher imaginable, like a well trained guard dog unerringly following the scent. He knew liars too, having heard every excuse, obfuscation, and deception possible. And Volkov could tell, instinctively, when a man was afraid, when he was hiding something, when he was worried. The innkeeper was lying, and he pressed him on the matter at once.

“Old plumbing, eh? Where does that door lead?”

“Oh, that goes nowhere. It is not used. We keep it permanently locked now.”

Then they heard it—that plaintive knock on the door at the top of the stairs. The Captain flashed his teeth in a wry smile. “Not used, you say? Then who is knocking?” He turned to the innkeeper, clearly annoyed.

“Open that door!” The tall grey eyed Captain was adamant, pointing at the door, a suspicious look redoubled in his eye.

“But sir, that is just the upper landing for an old, unused stairway. It isn’t used any longer!”

“Someone is there, I tell you. I heard knocking on that door just a moment ago.”As if on cue there came another knock, soft and plaintive, and a muffled voice. The innkeeper’s eyes widened when he heard it, as though it was the ghostly hand of a specter knocking, and he was clearly distressed.

“Open it, I tell you! This is a matter of wartime security! I am giving you a direct order, and if you do not comply I will have military police commandeer this entire facility. Understand?”

“As you wish, as you wish…” the innkeeper, a gray haired old man, began fumbling with his keys, his hand trembling as he then unlocked the door.

Volkov reached to his side holster, removing his service pistol as the old man unlatched a safety bolt and slowly twisted the door knob, an anguished look on his face. The door opened with a dry squeak on its rusty hinges, and there came a dank, stuffy odor, as from an old closet that had not been opened for ages. The innkeeper gave a start, hand clutching his breast when he saw someone standing on the upper landing. “Dear God, not again,” he whispered, but Volkov quickly shoved him aside.

“You there, come out,” he commanded, brandishing his pistol.

A Young man, strangely dressed, emerged from the shadows of the landing with a bemused expression on his face. He looked at Volkov’s pistol; saw the steely eyes of the man, then the innkeeper’s obvious fear and discontent. He spoke in a halting fashion, his speech tentative, as though he were searching for the words. “I’m very sorry…I was just looking for my room.”

“Come out of there,” Volkov ordered, eying the darkened stairs suspiciously to make certain no one else was there. The old stairway was completely dark descending into velvety black shadows in just a few steps. “You are a guest here? What room number?”

“Excuse me?” The young man seemed flustered. “Oh yes…Room 214. Just down the hall.”

Volkov turned to the innkeeper. “You know this man?”

The old man’s eyes clearly revealed his uncertainty, and fear. Volkov’s suspicions ticked up a notch as he watched the man closely. “Well? Is he a guest here or not?”

“I am not certain. He could have been checked in by my daughter when I was in town getting food for the kitchen.”

The young man could see there was a problem, and the tall grey coated man with the pistol appeared to be a police officer or security man, so he began explaining, again with halting speech, uncertain of the words, and Volkov immediately knew he was not Russian.

“I was in the dining room with my guide for breakfast when that light flashed in the sky—some kind of explosion. Did you see it?”

“Explosion? What are you talking about? Step away from that stairway—yes, over here by the wall where I can get a good look at you. You say you were with a guide? Was anyone else with you just now? Answer truly. This is a matter of state security.”

“I met others in the dining room, but no, sir. I am traveling alone.”

Volkov gave him a knowing look. Another liar, he thought. The man was obviously flustered, very nervous. He was trying to hide something.

“You are a tourist? A foreigner?”

“Yes, from England.”

Volkov smiled. “Not a very good place to be from these days,” he said darkly. “At least not here. I will need to see your passport at once. What is your name?” Volkov lowered his pistol, seeing there was no real threat from

this impish young man.

“My name? I am Thomas Byrne, sir, a reporter for the Times of London. I’m just here to cover the Great Race.” He made as if to drive a car, turning the wheel back and forth in a pantomime. “I was interviewing the German team just last night when they came in.” The young man forced a smile, but Volkov was not impressed.

“Race?” The Captain turned to the innkeeper. “What is this man talking about? Is there some event underway here?”

“Not that I know of, sir.” The innkeeper gave the young man a strange look, noting the watch fob on his tweed sports coat, the old style wool trousers and the mud caked on his boots. “You came up this stairway, young man?”

“Yes…but I was just trying to find my room…” He blinked, looking about him now as though he were lost.

It had been a very strange morning. He was up early that day, chancing upon that energetic fellow in the dining room for breakfast, Mironov. The man had warned him about this. He told him all foreigners were suspect and that he was surely being watched. One look at this tall, grey-eyed man in a military coat and hat convinced him Mironov was not joking. Then came the incredible light, the sudden wild wind, and the thrumming shock wave in the air that had broken all the windows. He and his guide had hurried outside with Mironov and found the townspeople, those that were awake at that hour, dumbly staring to the northeast. When he looked he saw a terrible fire in the sky, as though a massive forest fire were burning up all of Siberia. What could have happened?

They went back to the dining room with that other strange man, who also had a pistol. Byrne could only assume that this man before him now was an associate. In fact, the cut of his clothing was oddly familiar, much like that of the man he had seen in the dining room. They were obviously security men—what was it that Mironov called them? He could not remember the name, but there was no mistaking the pistols they were carrying. What if I get into trouble, he thought? What if I get deported? Old Mister Harmsworth would be most unhappy in that event. I could even lose my job!

“I think you and I will take a little walk,” said Volkov. “I wish to speak with this guide you mentioned. Then he turned to the innkeeper. “And you, sir, will be kind enough to go to the front desk and look up this man’s reservation. I wish to examine those records.”

“As you wish…” The innkeeper was still staring at the young man as though he were seeing a ghost.

“Very well, let’s go down and find this guide of yours.” Volkov gestured to the stairwell, waving the young man on.

“Oh, you won’t want to use this stairway, sir.” The innkeeper seemed very flustered. “As I have said, it is not used any longer. There is no light and the dust and cobwebs—”

“Don’t be stupid, this man obviously just came up those stairs.” Volkov gave the innkeeper a discerning look. He dropped all pretense of civility now. The man was very edgy, nervous, ill at ease, and now he seemed to be trying to impose himself between Volkov and the stairwell.

“Please, let us all use the main stairs, and I’ll get this old drafty stairway locked up again, eh? The boards on the steps are loose with rusty old nails. It isn’t safe.”

“Stand aside!” Volkov raised his pistol. “What are you hiding old man? I think I had better go and find out.”

Volkov pinched his collar to activate his jacket microphone. “Jenkov. Meet me in the dining room—and get a man on the main stairway at once. Keep an eye on the innkeeper.” He looked at the innkeeper with a snide smile. “And *you* can meet me at the front desk, old man. I’ll have a guard there to interview you further. Something is going on here, and I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

Volkov flashed a toothy grin at the young man now. “We can begin by getting to the bottom of these stairs.”

The innkeeper could see there was nothing to be done, so he raised his hands in frustration and walked off toward the main stairway, very agitated. Volkov waved his pistol at the young Englishman. “Get moving, down the stairs, just the way you came.”

“Of course. My guide will explain everything. I meant no harm, sir. In fact I was just going to my room to fetch my belongings and check out.”

Volkov waited while the man turned and started down the stairs. He followed, close behind, watching the man’s hands carefully in case he tried anything. The shadows enfolded them as they descended, and he heard a distant rumble, like the sound of artillery firing, which alarmed him. Half way down the stairs there came a strange sensation, a light-headedness that made him feel faint, and he reached for the wall to steady himself, his hand brushing against old cobwebs there. The sensation passed, and they reached

the bottom of the stairs, stepping into a small alcove.

"Just a moment…" Volkov edged past the man, peering cautiously around the edge of the wall as if he might find someone waiting in ambush. It was the dining room, or so he thought, but perhaps a lower level. This room seemed very different, cold and cheerless, lit only be the fire from the hearth. There were no lights, no chandelier, and the table settings and linen were all gone, leaving him more suspicious than ever. A secret room, he thought. This old stairway leads down to another room—perhaps a hidden cellar.

He turned to the Englishman, a gleam in his eye. "Well? Where is this guide you speak of? Be quick man, I don't have all day here."

"I…Well, I don't know…" the young man seemed very confused. Then they heard the sound of heavy footfalls on the hard wood floor and Volkov turned, expecting to see Jenkov coming as ordered.

Three men came stomping in, all dressed in military garb, olive green uniforms, blue caps with red hatbands and insignia, and they all held weapons. A fourth man followed them, moving with a slow deliberate gait, a cigarette in one hand, a pistol in the other. "Stand where you are!" he said sharply. "Get his weapon!"

The men all trained their guns on Volkov, two with submachine guns and the third, a shorter man in a leather military jacket with black boots and faired trousers also held a pistol. He walked slowly up to Volkov, extending his hand slowly to reach for his weapon.

"What is the meaning of this?" Volkov was immediately angered, but he could see he was out gunned here, and surrendered his pistol. This was most likely a military security sweep, he thought. He would straighten matters out directly.

"Do you know who I am?" he said indignantly.

"That remains to be seen," said the fourth man, obviously an officer, with flat shoulder board insignia inlaid with blue stars. He turned to the short man with the odd glasses. "Is this the man?"

The shorter officer leaned in close, squinting behind small round wire frame spectacles as he looked at Volkov. It was Lieutenant Mikael Surinov, the NKVD man Fedorov had cowed and chastised at Irkutsk for mistreating the detainees on his train. He looked Volkov up and down, rubbing his chin.

"His uniform is suspicious," he said. "Somewhat familiar….I don't recognize him, but there were others. Perhaps this man is one of them!" He smiled, stepping back from Volkov and the Englishman, a smirk on his face.

“We had better question them both.”

The officer dropped his cigarette, crushing it slowly under his boot. “Well, well, well,” he began. Then he came out with the line that had opened interrogations the world over for generations.

“Your papers! Both of you. I’ll get to the bottom of this soon enough.”

Chapter 27

Fedorov slept for a long time after they reached the train, weary in a way he could not explain. He was plagued by strange dreams, visions of Mironov's face, a city at the edge of a vast inland sea, and high on a hill the prominent statue of a uniformed man, arm raised in a proud salutation. Then he slowly awoke to the gentle rocking of the train, the monotonous sound of the wheels on the rails growing louder as he regained consciousness.

He opened his eyes, realizing where he was again, in the enclosed *kupe* compartment at the back of the coach car. The *provodnits,* saw him stir and he went forward to heat water on the samovar. Troyak was sitting across from him, looking fresh and alert. Zykov was sleeping on the upper bunk.

"How long?" said Fedorov.

"A good long while," said Troyak. "We're puling into Omsk in ten minutes."

"Omsk? Then I must have slept all day!"

"We all did," said Troyak. "Listen…Zykov is still snoring."

"We leave the main line here," said Fedorov. "We must take a spur heading west through Chelyabinsk to Orsk on the Kazakh border. From there we cross into Kazakhstan and take a local rail line from Aktobe to Atyrau on the north Caspian Sea. After that we'll have to see how we get down south, but we must steer clear of Astrakhan."

"We'll need to eat," said Troyak. "Sleep is one thing, but the food on this train leaves something to be desired." He gave Fedorov a long look, a question in his eyes. "Colonel… what happened back there, at Ilanskiy? You seemed very shaken when we boarded the train. You wouldn't speak a word."

Fedorov thought for a moment. "I… well I'm not exactly sure. We were all up stairs in the room when we heard that sound, like an avalanche, distant thunder. The two of you started your sweep, and I was at the top of that old back stairway. It was very odd, probably just an echo, but I had the firm impression the sound was coming from that stairwell."

Troyak gave him a knowing look, but said nothing, listening with a serious expression on his face. Fedorov sat up, the memory of that harried

awakening returning.

“I went down the stairs—into the dining hall, but it was…different, strangely different. All the tables had linen and ornate oil lamps, but the windows were shattered and I heard sounds of people shouting outside.”

Then he told him how he had gone outside to see the massive glow on the horizon, the brightness of the sky, and the ominous sound of explosions, far away. “That’s what woke us, Troyak, that terrible sound. When I ran outside I encountered a group of men, Mironov, an Englishman, and his guide, a man named Yevchenko, or so I was told.”

“Mironov? You mean the man Zykov brought in?” Troyak was surprised to hear this.

“Exactly! But Troyak! That place—the inn—it was the same in many ways, yet different. I mean, it was clear to me that this was the inn at Ilanskiy, but the village outside was much smaller. There were no buildings at all between the inn and the rail lines. And the train…yes! The train was gone too!”

Troyak gave him a strange look now, a flicker of disbelief in his eyes. “We couldn’t find you, Colonel, not even using the comm-link locators in your jacket. Zykov and I searched the whole building—outside too. Zykov went all the way to the rail yard, but the train was there. We’re sitting on it, Fedorov.”

“I know…I know…but what I’m saying is true.”

Fedorov shook his head. “This is going to sound very odd now, Troyak, but you must believe me. It happened just as I’m about to tell you. This whole place, the town, the rail yard, the inn, was completely different. And another thing—it was morning! At first I thought it was that massive explosion we heard, but then I could clearly see the morning sun, though it was rising through a terrible orange fire in the sky to the northeast.

“But Fedorov…We saw none of this! It was an hour before midnight when we were awakened.”

“Yes I believe you, Sergeant, but you must believe me as well. I spoke with that man—Mironov—and he even invited me to join his party for breakfast. He handed me…” Fedorov reached into this coat pocket, a look of excitement in his eyes. “Yes!” He pulled out a piece of dark rye bread, his hand shaking a bit. “He handed me this piece of bread when he made the invitation! Then three men came in—Germans, Troyak, so you can understand I was very surprised and confused by all this.”

“Germans? Here?”

“I swear it.” Fedorov shook his head. “All I could think to do was get the hell back up those stairs and then I saw you in the upper hall.”

“Did the Germans get this far during the war? I thought we stopped them on the Volga.”

“No, no. You misunderstand me. What you say is correct. We did stop them on the Volga, but these men we not soldiers…and it wasn’t 1942.”

Now Troyak cocked his head to one side, eyes narrowing. What was the Colonel talking about?

“Bear with me,” Fedorov continued.

“Alright, but it’s almost *midnight*, Fedorov. You were gone for an hour. We searched the whole area. Now you’re telling me you were just downstairs? And this explosion you speak of. Yes, I heard it too when I was searching the top floor of the inn. And yes, it seemed to me that it was coming from that stairwell, so I went down to have a look.”

“You went down the back stairs too?”

“Yes, and all I found was that woman by the fire. Nothing else, Colonel.”

This gave Fedorov pause, his eyes dark and searching, as if he was trying to determine something and solve the riddle. “So it doesn’t always work,” he said, more to himself than to Troyak. “Listen…The Man Zykov brought in… He called himself Mironov, but do you remember what I asked him? I asked him what year it was. And did you hear what he said? He said it was 1908! Well, when I was near the front desk and those Germans came in I saw a calendar there, and sure enough, it was set to June 1908. That doesn’t necessarily prove anything, and that’s why I asked that man the day and year. Yet he said it was the thirtieth of June, 1908, and without the slightest hesitation. This sounds crazy, but it happened, Troyak. You heard him yourself.”

“Yes, I heard him say that, but a man might say anything when he is frightened. It seemed like he thought we were police.”

“Yet why give such an outlandish date?”

The Sergeant folded his arms over his broad chest, breathing deeply. “It’s been a long trip, Colonel. You slept a very long time. Perhaps this was all just a dream?”

“Not this, Troyak. No, I’m certain of it. It sounds impossible, but when I went down those stairs I was…*somewhere else*. It was too real to be a dream. I mean, I was here, but in another year. That’s the only way I can understand

it now. That would sound completely insane were it not for the experiences we've both lived through these last months. The impossible has become commonplace for us. But I just can't figure out what happened exactly—or how it happened. It must be a localized event, possibly even an aftereffect of the big event. It must be confined to that one small space—the stairway." Again he seemed to be speaking more to himself now, sorting through something in his mind.

"What do you mean?"

When I went down, I regressed in *time*, Troyak! Yes, to the year 1908! That explains why everything was different, even the time of day. I could dismiss it all as a delusion or dream until Zykov brought that fellow in—Mironov! That was the man I spoke with in the dining hall; the man who gave me this bread. And look, it's still fresh!"

"But how, Fedorov? I don't understand any of this. You tried to explain how the ship moved before, but even that was beyond me—all this business about the reactors and Rod-25."

"I can't say I understand it all yet either, but it happened. I swear it. Zykov brought Mironov in and I was truly shaken, because the moment I saw him I knew everything that I experienced at the other end of those stairs was real and *not* a dream. Understand? So I asked him the date, and you heard what he said."

Troyak sighed, nodding.

"Well that is a very special date, Sergeant. June 30th, 1908. Do you know what happened on that day?" Fedorov smiled now, his eyes alight with the vigor of his inner thoughts. "The explosion, the rumbling sounds, the glow we saw—I confirmed that it was some massive detonation to the northeast. Well, on the morning of June 30, 1908, about 600 kilometers northeast of Ilanskiy, something exploded above the taiga near Vanavara, along the river they call the Stony Tunguska."

"Tunguska?"

"Yes, you've heard of it. We all have. It's been a great unexplained mystery for decades. Some say it was an asteroid, others a comet, still others say it was caused by some kind of miniature black hole but, whatever it was, it happened on that date—the same date Mironov reported. It was the morning of the *Tunguska* event, Troyak, and I saw it, plain as a second sunrise in the northeast. I saw it with my own eyes!"

Troyak remained silent. He did not know what to make of all this, but

then again one thing Fedorov said struck home. The impossible was made commonplace for the men of *Kirov*. He had watched, dumbfounded, as the ship fought its way through the North Atlantic and Mediterranean, amazed at what he was seeing, but stalwart nonetheless. Seeing was believing. He saw the Japanese planes from the Second World War dive bombing the ship, and he himself had vanished from the world he once knew to appear here, on a train to Omsk in the middle of 1942! Things that he once deemed fantasy had become grippingly real. He was now a believer. He had heard the siren song of time like the others and it was trying to drive him mad.

He steadied himself, deciding to give Fedorov the benefit of any doubt. He had gone down those stairs himself, and saw nothing—except the same strange illusion they were still riding in at this very moment, the Trans-Siberian rail line in Stalin's Russia. What Fedorov was saying is that time slipped again. He went down those stairs and saw something. At least he could believe that much. What reason would the Colonel have to make up a story like this? He had no haversack to put this into, no drill or military routine to set in motion. This was just another here and now, and the old instincts that had served him for so many years in the Marines would just have to do.

"Perhaps the Tunguska event *caused* all this," said Fedorov. "Perhaps it ripped a hole in the fabric of space and time—right there, in that one small place—the back stairs of the inn at Ilanskiy. How that could have affected the ship I have yet to see, but it was a very strange coincidence. Very strange. Yes, it's crazy, but there it is. I know what I saw, and I'll tell you another thing…" He looked searchingly at Troyak, not sure that he had followed him this far and unwilling to lose his strength and support.

"That man Zykov brought in…Well he called himself Mironov. That name rankled in the back of my head for a while, and then I remembered it. Mironov! That wasn't his real name, of course. That's why I pressed him on it. His real name was Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov. He just shortened that middle name and called himself Mironov as an alias. I read a lot of history, Sergeant. In 1907 that man was arrested on charges of distributing leaflets against the state, and imprisoned."

"Who was imprisoned?"

"Mironov, or I should say Kostrikov. Do you know that name, Troyak?"

"Can't say I do. Who is he?"

"Well he went by that name when the Tsar's secret police began to

shadow him. He was a member of the Social Democrats before the revolution. Then he assumed an alias and called himself Mironov. There was an illegal printing press in a hidden room in Tomsk. This was back in 1907, you see, and he was part of all that, though the Okhrana never found it until 1909."

"Okhrana?"

"The Tsar's secret police. They had enough suspicion to arrest and indict him. He was imprisoned at Tomsk for 16 months, though he later claimed he was sentenced to three years to make it seem he suffered more heroically than was the case back then. He was a revolutionary, you see, arrested for advocating the overthrow of the existing civil structure of the state—the Old Russia, Troyak, under Nikolay Alexandrovich Romanov—Nicholas II, the last Tsar! Well, they released Mironov in June of 1908, and very little is known about his life for the following eighteen months. It was believed that he went south to Novosibirsk, and then wrote his sister in Irkutsk and went to visit her there. If that is the case then he would have seen it—Tunguska! He would have been right there where we were on the Trans-Siberian rail line heading east to Irkutsk on the morning of June 30th, 1908."

"Who would have seen it? This man Mironov?"

"Yes, of course. Mironov was Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov, but you and I know him by yet another alias that he took upon himself some years later. In fact, we serve on the very ship that was given his name—*Kirov*."

Fedorov had a satisfied smile on his face now, for at least one part of this incredible incident made sense to him—the part he could fetch from his history books. "Don't you see, Troyak?" he said, his voice low, barely a whisper. "That was Kirov! The Okhrana found the hidden printing press in April of 1909 and began looking for him again, so he fled south to the Caucasus and changed his name. Some say the prefix *Kir* comes from the Persian word for King, and he just Russianized the word and called himself Kirov. Sergei *Kirov*, one of the great men of the Russian Revolution! There was a statue of the man overlooking the harbor in Baku for many years until it was removed a few years ago in our day. You've seen the statue in St. Petersburg as well. We've named towns, cities and ships for the man ever since."

"Amazing," said Troyak. "You are a very well educated man, Fedorov, but are you certain of this?"

"I knew the moment I named him, Sergeant. I could see the recognition in

his eyes. It was Kirov. He died a kind of martyr when he was assassinated in Leningrad on the first day of December, 1934—shot in the back of the head as he was leaving his office that evening. He was very close to Stalin, you know, and Stalin reacted to his death with what we now call the Great Purge. A million died, but many historians suspect that Stalin himself was connected to Kirov's assassination in some way. Nikita Khrushchev stated that Stalin personally gave the order to have his old friend, and chief rival, killed. He tried to control Kirov, who was taking a very lenient attitude against opponents of the party at that time, but he failed. Kirov was very popular, much more so than Stalin. After his death Stalin eliminated all his potential opponents and fully consolidated power…And that was *him*, Troyak! That was Sergei Kirov as a young man in 1908! He must have come up that back stairway and walked right into our little nightmare here in 1942. That's why I was so adamant that he go back down those stairs. Understand?"

Troyak looked bewildered, but Fedorov's energy and enthusiasm had carried him along this rail line from Vladivostok of 2021 to Omsk of 1942. He could believe anything now.

"Well I'll be a horse's ass," he said. "Kirov!"

Part X

The Lost Sheep

"A sheep, once it has strayed away, is a creature remarkably stupid and heedless; it goes wandering on without any power or inclination to return back, though each moment it is in danger of becoming a sacrifice to every beast of prey that it meets."

—Rev. Thomas Stackhouse

Chapter 28

Admiral Volsky was sitting at the command desk receiving scattered reports from assets throughout the North Pacific region, and the picture they were painting was very mixed. Two A-50U AEW planes had been deployed in the initial standoff with the Americans. Of these, one plane designated ‘Black Bear’ had been destroyed in the early minutes of the US attack. Yet Karpov’s plan was executed perfectly, and the moment the Russians confirmed the Americans were going weapons hot they stole a march on them with their long range air and sub launched cruise missiles. The initial damage reports were very encouraging, but tensions rose in the staff briefing room at Fokino when the US strike squadrons engaged.

“We took a few hits, Admiral,” said Talanov, Volsky’s new Chief Of Staff. “Minor damage on the *Varyag*, but it looks like we’ll lose one of the *Udaloy* class destroyers. All things considered we were not hurt that badly.”

“Yes, but that is one less destroyer on the watch, and we’re still waiting on the second American strike group,” said Volsky. “It was coming in from the east and was engaged by *Kuznetsov’s* fighters.”

“That was quite a duel, sir. We lost eight Mig-29s but have nine confirmed kills. *Kuznetsov* appears to have shielded our flank as planned.”

“We’re trading them plane for plane,” said Volsky, “and we both know we cannot do that for very long. The Americans still have two more carrier battlegroups in theater at the moment, not to mention their Third Fleet mustering in the Eastern Pacific.”

Talanov was handed a signals decrypt, and read it quickly. “Karpov apparently executed phase two of his long range attack as well. We just received the code *Longarm*, sir, but we are not sure if it was executed.”

“If so, that will mean he has no further long range assets, unless we can get another squadron of bombers to him quickly. What is the status of our—”

There came a noticeable shudder, and Talanov looked up at the overhead lighting. It was followed soon after by a strong blast wave and three windows in the outer room shattered. The Admiral was very surprised. “Are we under attack?”

“We had nothing on radar, sir. No alert warnings of any kind!”

“Don’t forget their damn B-2s, Talanov,” Volsky admonished, and then

they heard it, a deep roar that sounded as if the earth itself had growled in anger. The Demon on the Iturup / Urup island gap had finally blown its top. A much stronger shock wave was felt, and Admiral Volsky was nearly thrown from his chair. He turned, awestruck, as he saw the angry red glow on the horizon and what looked like a massive mushroom cloud out east where the fleet had deployed. His first thought was that the Americans had struck with nuclear weapons.

"My God," he breathed. "It's begun."

Talanov shouted at the NBC watch station. "What's our reading on Gamma?"

"Nothing to report, sir. No noticeable increase in background radiation."

Then the meteorological desk quickly intervened. "It's not nuclear, Captain. But we have high seismic readings. SVERT is reporting from Sakhalin Island. It's an eruption from the volcano we've been monitoring, and a big one, sir."

Volsky was up and across the room, leaning over the meteorological desk to look at the readings and then looking over his shoulder at the massive cloud darkening their eastern horizon. "It's enormous," he said. "The hand of God this time, and not the petty quarrels of man and machine. Our fleet must be very close to ground zero, yes?"

"They were about thirty kilometers south of the Kuriles, sir. They would have had a much stronger shock wave, and perhaps heavy seas. This looks like a very significant event. There could be major pyroclastic flows in an eruption of this scale."

"Signal fleet flag and request immediate status update."

"Aye, sir."

The wait was agonizing, twenty minutes in oblivion where the fate of the Red Banner Fleet remained unknown, with no signal returns and interference all across the electromagnetic spectrum. The towering ash cloud was so massive it was creating its own weather, ripped by lightning and thunderous brimstone. Volsky was pacing, and ten minutes later he gave orders to move the A-100 AEW plane out of the danger zone. Talanov was quick to agree.

"The smoke and ash cloud from that volcano will complicate air operations in the region for days, Admiral. If these initial readings are accurate, the event could be a seven on the eruptive scale index, and ash fall could extend nearly a thousand kilometers. We've already lost communications links with most every facility in the southern Kuriles.

Korsakov is preparing to terminate all operations on Sakhalin Island, as well as all other facilities at Aniva Bay there. We'll have to consider a possible sealift evacuation if the ash fall prevents air operations. The whole of Hokkaido Island could be hit with a very large tsunami and be well under that ash cloud within the hour. This will also affect the American base at Misawa. The eruption is going to stop this engagement cold. There's no way that American air strike can get through that ash now, but that said it will be all we can do to get the fleet to safe water."

"Why don't they answer? Have we sent out low frequency communications to the fleet undersea escort?"

"We have, sir, but they do not respond. The surface fleet would have been right in the path of that pyroclastic flow, assuming they survived the shock wave after that second eruption."

They waited out the next ten minutes until the news finally came in. The *Akula* class escort sub *Gepard* was on close fleet escort and moved to periscope depth to attempt to confirm the location of the fleet.

"Sir! *Gepard* reports visual contact on Udaloy class destroyers *Marshal Shaposhnikov, Admiral Tributs* and *Admiral Panteleyev."*

"They would have been in the outer ASW screen, farther away from the main fleet, but they are still afloat. We know *Admiral Vinogradov* was hit there, and most likely sunk. Give it some time, sir. The remaining units were in tight with the fleet flagship. *Gepard* is moving to make contact as we speak."

Volsky waited, but no further news was received. *Admiral Kuznetsov* eventually called home over a very garbled communications band to request permission to withdraw west away from the ever widening ash fall zone. *Gepard* searched for the next three hours, including very risky active sonar pings aimed at locating the remainder of the fleet. They even deployed infrared detectors on the seafloor beneath the flagship's last reported position and this led to some very disheartening news.

"We found wreckage, sir. *Gepard* is getting emergency transponder beacon signal traffic from the sea bottom at these coordinates."

"What ship?"

"We can't determine that yet. It was just a generic signal, with no IFF carrier wave data." Talanov had a grim expression on his face.

"And *Kirov?* Any news from Karpov?"

Talanov could see the Admiral had a strong emotional connection to that

ship. He never knew what had happened to *Kirov* in these last months, only that Volsky had conducted some top secret deployment to eventually relocate the ship from the North Atlantic to Vladivostok. Men and ships become one thing in a navy man's mind, he knew, and he could see the obvious look of concern on the Admiral's face, glassy eyed, as if he was waiting for news in a hospital waiting room.

"Sir…Request permission to move fleet undersea recovery units to the scene to investigate further." Talanov waited respectfully, and Volsky slowly turned.

"Please do so, Mister Talanov. If they can get there safely. From the looks of that ash cloud that may prove impossible. What could be alive under that?" His face had an ashen look now, as though he himself were under that cloud. "I will be in my office. Keep me informed the moment you hear anything."

There was nothing more to report. By mid afternoon it was beginning to look like the Red Banner Pacific Fleet had taken a fatal blow. There was no report from *Kirov* and they had lost contact with every other ship in the core fleet formation. Cruiser *Varyag*, destroyer *Orlan* and the new frigate *Admiral Golovko* were all still missing in action. Volsky waited, an inner intuition thrumming in his mind with dark presentiment and warning. It was physical, that old tooth that always acted up in the cold of the north Atlantic. He touched it with the tip of his tongue, felt a twinge of pain, and knew something was very, very wrong.

* * *

Aboard CVN *Washington* Captain Tanner was desperately coordinating damage control operations on his stricken carrier while receiving scattered reports from the strike groups he had out after the enemy. Just after 10:40 hours the screen had detected another barrage of missiles inbound from the north. *McCampbell* had engaged, joined soon after by *McCain* and *Fitzgerald*. The cruiser *Shiloh* had recovered power and was able to get some of her medium range missiles into the action as well, but tanner's harried flotilla was about to be hit by the wrath of the *Vulkans*.

They got more than half of the big missiles, and all but one of the P-700 shipwrecks, but it was another unexpected attack in the heat of a difficult situation, and ships were hit. The P-700 had picked on *Lassen* again, slamming her amidships and putting an end to her useful service. Five of the *Vulkans* penetrated the badly disorganized screen and bored in on the inner

formation. *Shiloh* got three of them; the other two got Tanner's big CV in their cross hairs and drove home. The carrier fired a frantic barrage from her RIM-116 Rolling Airframe Missile system and knocked one of these down, but the last slammed a 1000 kilogram warhead into her side, gravely injuring the carrier and making further flight operations impossible.

That last hit was an effective "mission kill" on CVN *Washington*, though her flotation was not compromised and she still had power. The fires on the hanger deck were very involved, and Tanner gave orders that all aircraft aloft would have to divert to Japan. He was busy on the line with his Air Boss giving orders to coordinate air refueling for his thirsty strike assets with anything they could get in the air from other land bases.

"See what they can get up from Misawa before that ash fall closes the place down, and anything available at Yokota—and do it now, Boss Man. That last missile just put you and me out of a job. It will be all we can do now to get this big baby to safe waters."

At that moment they heard a tremendous explosion, and Tanner literally ran to the view ports to look down his long flight deck, thinking they had been hit yet again. It wasn't long before his Cloud Man reported on the eruption, the wrath of the *Vulkans* had only just begun.

They pulled in any information they could in the midst of the chaos of the next several minutes. It wasn't long before the massive column of ash, steam and pumice was seen rising on their northern horizon.

"Holy God," breathed Tanner to his XO, Skip Patterson. "Will you look at that mess?"

"Nothing we have in the air now is going to get anywhere close to engaging the Russians on that right flank, sir."

"Hell, we won't have to lift another damn finger. SITREP had the core of the Russian fleet right in the shadow of that monster. They were no more than thirty klicks south of that island."

"Looks like this Karpov is going to get a mouth full of smoke and ash," said Patterson.

"Serves him right. Cagey bastard was thinking to use that initial eruption this morning to screen his task force from my planes."

"That he did, sir. It split our strike package in two."

"Well, look at him now. The Russkies are in a world of shit up there. He must have got off that last salvo just before that thing blew its top."

The distraction actually imposed a strange calm on the bridge, and they

stood there for some time watching the skies darkening to the north. Then Ensign Pyle produced a message from Anderson AFB on Guam with more details on the eruption.

"Big seismic signature," said Tanner. "Anderson says they got a look at it from space. They *heard* the damn thing go up all the way out on Guam, and the eruption is already over forty kilometers high! It's pierced the stratosphere all the way to the edge of space. We've been ordered to withdraw all fleet assets and make for Guam for repairs. They'll probably scoot our ass back to Pearl when they see the holes those missiles poked in our side. The ash fall will saturate most of Hokkaido and even reach as far south as the main island, so they don't want us back at Yokosuka. This thing is big, Skip. Just when we thought to raise a little hell out here old Mother Nature knocks our heads together with something like this."

"I think we got the worst of this little brawl, sir."

"That we did. This Karpov beat us to the punch, but we've learned a valuable lesson here. I acted on that flash traffic but I was a stupid son-of-a-bitch to do so. We should have coordinated this strike with *Nimitz*. What we've learned today is just how good those damn long range missiles the Russians have actually are."

"We put up a pretty good score on defense, sir."

"Not good enough, Skip. We can't trade a fleet carrier for four or five missiles, can we? Thank God they build these things like a rock. The Russians will take note of this little engagement as well. They threw everything they had at us and still couldn't put us on the bottom of the sea. But before they have too much time to think about that, let's move everyone in tight with us and get this old girl pointed south."

"*McCampbell* says they have everyone they could pull off *Lassen*, sir. She's still afloat but pretty well gutted above the waterline."

"USPACFLT wants us to send Davey Jones a present. We've got orders to sink *Lassen*, and that means we gave up two *Arleigh Burkes* for a couple old *Udaloys*. We got the short end of that deal too."

"Aye, sir. But maybe our boys put the hurts on the Russians up north after all."

"We may never know with that mess out there. Satellites can't see a thing. We'll have to see if we can get a sub in there to have a look."

Before noon that day Tanner was going to find his beleaguered task force in an early midnight. The ash fall was much thicker and more pronounced

than anyone expected, and prevailing winds were driving it right in his direction. The skies began to deepen to amber and then sallow gray as the hours progressed. Soon the skies were blackening and virtually no sunlight was getting through the intense clouds of silt and ash. The aerosols would rise into the upper atmosphere and interact with other gases there to form sulfuric acid, which reflected almost 90% of the sunlight away from the earth. It was going to be a very cold winter throughout the entire northern hemisphere, and the year following the last eruption on this same scale was called “the year without summer.” Crops would fail, acid rains and fogs would become commonplace, and the evening skies would be blood red for months on end.

It was as if the world itself had groaned with a roiling song of doom. To a world beset with war and strife, the Demon was a harbinger of the terrible days ahead. It had exploded with a power a thousand times greater than a nuclear weapon, but in spite of that it was the missiles in their silos that were threatening to make an end to the human experiment on the planet, and the clock was still ticking.

When Tanner finally got one last report from a stealthy US sub that had been creeping up on the Russian Red Banner Pacific Fleet, he took heart.

“No news from *Key West* yet, but we just got traffic from *Mississippi*,” said Patterson. “We may just have some bragging rights after all! They say there’s no sign of those Russian ships up north. Looks like this little scrap is over for the time being. They spotted a couple *Udaloy* class destroyers afloat and running west for Vladivostok. Whether our planes took the rest down or that mountain did it, the good news is that the entire core of their fleet was blown to hell.”

Chapter 29

Kamenski sat at the desk, quietly stirring his tea. “So that’s what’s been going on in the Caspian region. How very interesting,” he said quietly. “And you call this thing Rod-25?”

“My Chief Engineer, Dobrynin, calls it that,” said Volsky. “It was a spare control rod for a standard 24-rod naval propulsion reactor. I don’t understand the engineering.”

The two men were sitting in Volsky office at Fokino, speaking quietly, with Inspector General Kapustin sitting with Kamenski opposite the Admiral. The hour was late, almost midnight, and Volsky was weary, disheartened by the lack of news on the fleet and needing sleep. But when Kapustin called again offering to make good on his promise to arrange a meeting with Kamenski, the Admiral decided sooner was better.

“That’s quite an amazing story, Admiral. And you say each time this control rod is used it causes a displacement event?”

“Apparently.” Volsky held up his hands, as empty as his understanding was on the whole matter. “I’m afraid my secrets end there, however. It sounds unbelievable, but I’ve experienced it—lived through things that I could not have imagined just three months ago. We have no idea how or why this happens, but seeing is believing.”

“How very interesting,” said Kamenski. “Controlled displacement…” His eyes seemed distant, thinking, seeing things far away, as if he were considering the vast ramifications of what Volsky was telling him now. Then his eyes brightened, and he turned to Kapustin.

“My good inspector General—you have records on all these things, do you not?”

“Control rods? Why, now that you mention it, yes I do!”

“How long would it take you to fetch information on this Rod-25? Could you tell me, for example, where it was manufactured?”

“Of course. I can log in with my computer and access those records right now, if you wish.”

“Please be so kind as to do so. Find out anything you can on this rod—where it comes from, who built it, materials used.”

“Certainly.” Kapustin stooped to reach for his briefcase, producing a laptop to log on to the naval logistics network. “I’ll just be a few moments.”

“Very good,” said Kamenski. “Well, Admiral, it’s a pity we never met before this,” he said calmly. “I think we would have been good friends, you and I. What you have told me concerning this Rod-25, as you call it, is most enlightening. It changes everything, you know. Everything.”

“Yes,” said Volsky. “It *literally* changes everything, which is why it is so dangerous. I must tell you I had grave reservations when Fedorov proposed we use it again. I was thinking to take it out into the deep and cast the damn thing into the ocean so it would never plague us again.”

“But you could not do this,” Kamenski said quietly. “The temptation was too great, yes?”

“Perhaps…. In the end I reasoned that if Fedorov was correct, then we might use it to prevent this damn war.”

“A noble cause, Admiral. But you and I know that it would not stop there, even if your officer is correct on this. I’ve had my eye on this situation for some time; pondering these very same questions. I’ve made it my business to learn a good deal about you, Admiral, particularly when you assumed command of *Kirov* for those live fire exercises. I suspected something was going to happen to the ship, but the where and when of it escaped me.”

Volsky was somewhat surprised. “You mean to say you suspected something even then? *Before* Kirov disappeared? I don’t understand. How could you know this? The accident had not yet occurred. It would seem to me that you could know nothing whatsoever of *Kirov’s* little journey to the past until she actually departed! Only then could history harbor the clues you uncovered—those photographs, for instance.”

He pointed to the photograph Kapustin had given him, of *Kirov* sailing proudly out from the Straits of Gibraltar, ready to turn south for her visit to the Island of St. Helena in 1942.

“Sound reasoning,” said Kamenski with a smile. “I worked through all this myself once. Believe me, it took a great deal of thought, and more than a little time. I was never a rich man, Admiral, nor did I ever desire fame. But realize that a man in my position has one commodity in abundance—information. I was privy to things in my years that were at the highest security classification, and I learned things that would shock you, even after what you have experienced and seen with your own eyes.”

“Does this relate to Rod-25?”

“Some of it. That was actually a new twist on the whole matter—even for me. Quite astounding!”

“Quite impossible,” said Volsky. “And yet it happens. That’s how we sent Fedorov back again—from the Primorskiy Engineering Center in Vladivostok, and that’s what my Chief Engineer is doing in the Caspian now. He’s setting up a mission to act as a recovery team for Fedorov.”

“Very enterprising,” said Kamenski. “And quite ingenious.”

“Our Mister Fedorov is exactly that,” said Volsky. “He’s been the guiding light throughout this whole affair. He was the first to realize what had happened to the ship, and he managed to convince us all in those early days after the event—even Karpov. Ever since then I have come to accept the impossible as commonplace. But I have done things that amaze me every time I think of them. Do you know I shook the hand of a British Admiral in 1942!”

“Admiral John Tovey,” said Kamenski.

“You know of the man?”

“That I do. He’s was rather diligent in the years after you met with him, Admiral. It seems he set up a secret branch within British intelligence system, known only to a very few. Even the highest ranking members of the British government had no idea of its existence—not even Churchill.”

“How did you learn of this?”

“I’m afraid secrets are very hard things to keep over the years. You would be amazed at all the things the KGB has learned. In fact, we had a man in Gibraltar when they first brought this Orlov in—though it wasn’t called the KGB back then. That was all before my time, but I took an interest in the file some years ago.”

“You knew of Orlov that long ago?”

“I didn’t, but Russian intelligence did. Their man was instrumental in getting Orlov safely out of British hands in Gibraltar and on a steamer heading east. Their intention was to get him to the NKVD, though I don’t think they had any real idea who the man was at the time—only that he was possibly associated with a ship that was bedeviling the British in the Med.”

“Then you know how this all turns out! You must already know what happened to Orlov, yes?”

“I’m afraid not. A million, million things happen each and every minute, Admiral, and the combined knowledge of every intelligence service in the world knows only a tiny fraction of it all. Consider a man quietly reading in the evening, alone in his study, or in those soft moments before he sleeps in bed. He is the only sentient human beings who knows what is happening in

that room! That little corner of the universe is entirely his domain, and he is the master of all fate there. No one else perceives or knows anything about it, and the fortunate writer of the book he is reading has no idea that his thoughts and words are living again, streaming through that quiet man's mind. What a sublime mystery that is, eh? Well, most of human experience is that way, like a book read quietly in the night, and no one ever knows about it. So to answer your question, we never did know what happened to Orlov after that, but we may just find that out now that your Mister Fedorov has gone off on this mission."

"What do you mean?"

"As you said, Admiral, things change. They change quite literally, sometimes in very subtle ways, other times quite dramatically."

"Then you've known of *Kirov* all along as well?"

"Not exactly," Kamenski explained. "Back then the GRU was mainly interested in finding out what was stiffening the hair on the back of the British necks in the game. Don't think the Royal Navy can sortie its entire home fleet and not have it noticed! The Russian government got wind of something, heard of a code word the British used for it all—Geronimo."

"Geronimo?"

"The name of a renegade Indian chief from the American West. I believe it was the name they gave to *Kirov* when the ship first appeared in 1941. The Japanese had another name for it in time. They called it Mizuchi, a sea devil of some kind."

"I'm afraid we lived up to that handle," said Volsky. "It was never our intention to intervene, though Karpov saw things differently in the beginning. But when you find yourself at sea in a fighting ship, perhaps one day you will understand why we fought as we did—not really for anything more than each other in the end."

"I understand," said Kamenski. "Yet now here we sit, with the power to use this mysterious Rod-25 to do some rather spectacular things."

"You are talking about displacement in time?"

"Of course—what else? That's our little dilemma now, is it not? For the first time we actually have control. We never dreamed it could be possible, but there it is—Rod-25."

"What do you mean…for the *first* time? You make it sound as though this has happened before."

"Deliberate displacement in time? No, you and your crew were the first to

manage that, or so I now believe. But as you have been so gracious in inviting me here to discuss this matter, I will stir a little honey into *your* tea now, Admiral." He smiled, leaning forward, his voice lowering. "I assume this room is secure? We've already said a great deal."

"There are the two Marines in the hall, but nothing said here could be overheard. You may also take my word that nothing is being recorded or monitored. The room is completely private."

"I will take your word on that." Kamenski removed his glasses and cleaned them on the hem of his sweater. "And then I will tell you both something now that will bring this situation into a hard focus—it didn't start with *Kirov*."

He let that sit there for a moment, watching the reaction on Volsky's face, his eyes shifting quietly from the Admiral to the Inspector General, who sat on the chair to his right, listing eagerly to all that was being said as he reviewed his records.

"What do you mean? Time displacement?"

"Exactly."

"There were *other* incidents?"

"You, yourself are aware of at least two others, Admiral—Fedorov and Markov—so don't be so surprised."

"These things happened before *Kirov* disappeared?"

"They did," Kamenski said flatly. "The first incident here in Russia was during the testing that became the Tsar Bomba detonation. We called it *Kuz'kina Mat'*, Kuzka's mother; just a little lesson Khrushchev wanted to teach the west. The Americans called it Big Ivan. It was the AN602 hydrogen bomb, the most powerful nuclear weapon ever detonated."

"It caused time displacement?" Volsky's eyes reflected his amazement.

"That it did. Two technicians observing the event vanished, though they were 150 kilometers away from the detonation site. We thought they were killed by the blast, until they turned up twelve days later with *vranyo* that no one could believe with a straight face. Yet they had something with them that proved their story was true—though we need not get into that now."

"Amazing… We also thought the accident on *Orel* was responsible for moving *Kirov* in time in the beginning. It was only later that we discovered the effects of Rod-25."

"The two may be related," said Kamenski. "It seems that highly explosive events can cause these displacements. They are most unsettling. The

scientists tell me it has something to do with the fabric of space and time being distorted or torn by the detonations. The blow holes in time, if you will."

"That was just what our own Doctor Zolkin suggested," Volsky said excitedly.

"A very wise man…Well, we began to perceive the Americans and British were secretly testing something more than their bombs back in those years. We observed several similar events in our own testing program, and confirmed that very large detonations produced other instances of time displacement. In fact…what do you think the nuclear testing program was really for, Admiral? We already knew how to make the damn things, and we knew that they worked, but once these time displacement effects were discovered people got very, very interested. We think the Americans got in on the act early with their really big tests—Castle Bravo, Ivy Mike. We knew what they were doing, of course, but our early testing produced no results. We assumed the detonation were not energetic enough, so we pumped up the mega-tonnage with the Tsar Bomba, and it worked! We believed the story those two technicians told us, because we deliberately put them there to see if anything would happen to them."

"Astounding…" Volsky did not know what to say. "The explosion aboard *Orel* was from a very small warhead, however, nowhere near the scale of the detonations you mention."

"Very curious," said Kamenski. "And I suppose that now your Rod-25 has something to do with this. The question is—what happened, and why?"

Kapustin had been listening avidly, even as he continued to search his data base. Soon his attention was being pulled from the things Kamenski was saying to the information on his screen, and now he raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised.

"Here it is, gentlemen!" he said jubilantly. "You see, there is something to be said for the plodding, meticulous work of a records keeper. I believe I have some information to offer at this point."

Kamenski turned his way, smiling. "Good for you, my friend. "What have you learned?"

"Rod-25 was manufactured by Rosatomica, a subsidiary of the big state enterprise overseeing the nuclear power industry. The rod was certified and shipped for live testing last year, but for some reason the test was cancelled. As one thing led to another the rod passed physical inspection and was

shipped to the naval storage facility at Severomorsk. That is how it came to your ship, Admiral, though it never should have entered active service without a live test."

"Indeed," said Volsky. "And no one knew of its effects until we used it for the first time aboard *Kirov?"*

"That appears to be the case, but there is something else you may wish to know, and I'm afraid it may amount to a very great deal." He smiled.

"Well Gerasim, don't be stingy," said Kamenski. "Out with it!"

"These rods…well they don't make them individually. They come in batches, lots as we call them. Those that don't pass physical inspection are destroyed, but in this particular lot *three* survived. One of those is your Rod-25."

"You mean to say—"

"Yes, I do, Pavel." Kapustin smiled broadly now. "There are two more!" He tapped lightly on the screen of his laptop. "And I can tell you exactly where they are."

Chapter 30

That news interested Kamenski a great deal. “Two more,” he said, “from the same lot you say?”

“Precisely,” said Kapustin. “One is right here, at Shkotovo-16!” He was referring to a special facility south of the naval headquarters building on the bay at Fokino that was used exclusively for the unshipping of nuclear fuels and other radioactive fleet waste. It would be stored there temporarily before being transferred to another site for permanent burial, called Shkotovo-32.

“I know this site well,” said Kapustin. “I have to inspect it every year, you see. We have five burial trenches there for low-level solid radioactive waste and more highly radioactive materials, such as ion-resin exchanger slurries from our nuclear-powered submarines. And when we remove the spent fuel rods, they are also stored here and on the technical support ships assigned to the facility. Then they get shipped to the Mayak Chemical Combine reprocessing plant in Chelyabinsk. We have 8,622 spent fuel assemblies at Shkotovo-32 by my last inventory count.”

“You see, Admiral? Information can be very useful in this world—even mundane statistics like those the Inspector here must tabulate. Yet now you say a control rod from the same lot as this Rod-25 is sitting there in storage?”

“They have to replace the rods they remove from the ships, yes? There are presently thirty-seven new control rods in inventory there, and one is from lot number18726, the same as this Rod-25.”

“Very useful!” Kamenski turned to Volsky now. “Admiral, I think it would be prudent if you were to have this control rod moved to a more secure location. Something tells me we may find it very useful in the near future.”

“The other rod is in the Naval Arsenal site at Severomorsk.”

“Get that one too, Admiral. Make the request seem routine, however. No need arousing undue suspicion. I must say, Gerasim, this, as the Americans might say, is a whole new ballgame now!”

Volsky seemed to hesitate, his eyes reflecting the concern in his mind. “Just what exactly are you proposing, Mister Kamenski?”

“Nothing, at the moment—only that we should quickly secure these two control rods to prevent any unexpected…complications.”

“I understand,” Volsky seemed satisfied. “I will see that they are very

safe. In the meantime, something you have said here tonight has given me a little hope. As you may know, we have not heard from *Kirov* since the eruption of that volcano out east."

"Oh? No I was not informed. They no longer tell me everything now that I'm retired, nor do I have room for very much more in this weary old head of mine. What are you are thinking about this eruption?"

"It was enormous," said Volsky. "Probably a thousand times bigger than our Tsar Bomba. You have just told me such events can cause time displacement. My fleet is missing, and for an Admiral that is a very disheartening thing. I was thinking, perhaps…"

"I see," said Kamenski. "I suppose we will just have to wait and see what we find out. Yes, Mother Nature can throw fits of her own that make our own efforts seem puny. We have thought of this, of course, and that is why most active volcanic sites are monitored very carefully. Thus far the eruptions we have investigated have not produced these effects. These eruptions do not involve nuclear fission. Something about that seems to be a very sharp knife when it comes to the fabric of space-time. Volcanic eruptions release much more energy, but it is geothermic, not nuclear. Though I will qualify that by saying that we've seen nothing on this scale since Mt. Tambora erupted in 1815. Perhaps the size of the eruption in the Kuriles will make some difference here."

Volsky nodded, his eyes dark with both sadness and fatigue. It was an hour past midnight, and then there came a soft knock on the outer door.

"Excuse me gentlemen," said the Admiral as he rose. He walked slowly over and spoke through the closed door. "Yes, what is it?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," came a muffled voice on the other side of the door. "A courier has arrived from Vladivostok."

At this Volsky raised an eyebrow, opening the door to see a young lieutenant of Marines coming smartly to attention. He knew the man had come directly from the Naval Logistics Building as ordered. They were posted there on a special security detail and ordered to check the contents of Fedorov's storage bin every night at midnight. If anything was found it was to be immediately taken to the Admiral at Naval Headquarters Fokino. The Lieutenant saluted, then handed the Admiral an envelope, saluting again.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. You may return to your duties." The Admiral closed the door, eying the envelope with great curiosity. Then he turned it over to the front side and his heart leapt. There, emblazoned on the envelope,

was the crest of the Russian Naval insignia! He recognized the envelope immediately! Kamenski watched, noting how the Admiral's hand seemed unsteady as he thumbed the envelope open.

"Some unexpected news?" he ventured, suddenly curious.

"Very unexpected!" Volsky read the note, his dark eyes suddenly alight with inner fire and barely contained excitement. "I had better sit down," he said, lowering himself heavily into his chair. "The news I've been waiting for concerning the fleet," he said with a smile. "Only now I do not know whether I should laugh or cry about it." He handed the note slowly to Kamenski, who took it eagerly and read it silently.

"I don't understand. This came by mail?"

"It was retrieved from the same storage locker your Mister Volkov meddled with. I've had guards there ever since."

"Well, this is most interesting!" Kamenski wasted no time reading the note. "And I suppose it also answers your question Admiral, more than one question, it seems. Geothermal energy can do more than we thought, but it appears to take an enormous event like that eruption to produce the effect."

"It does, indeed," said Volsky. "And it raises quite another conundrum in the process."

Kapustin had been listening, craning his neck and squinting to see the note, though he could not make it out. "What are you talking about?" he said with some frustration.

"Forgive me, Gerasim," said Kamenski. "May I, Admiral?"

Volsky nodded and Kamenski handed the note to the Inspector, who read it quickly, his face registering great surprise. He handed the note slowly back to the Admiral.

"What does this mean? Has it happened again?"

"It appears so," said Volsky. "That letter was written by our Mister Karpov. I recognize the handwriting. I've seen him sign off on a hundred duty boards in the months I was on that ship. My God…It *has* happened again. The only question now is what to do about it. He's sailed in towards Vladivostok to see if he could determine where he was—in time, I suppose."

"A wise decision," said Kamenski.

"Yes, but also dangerous. We discussed this at length aboard *Kirov*. Our consensus was that the technology we possessed should never be allowed to fall into the hands of any nation state in the past."

"Wise again," Kamenski nodded.

“Yet I wonder…” Volsky thought for a moment. “I told you that Karpov was of a different mind on how we should act in the beginning, but I never shared all the details on that. Suffice it to say that the Captain was somewhat determined to make what he called a decisive intervention in the history of those years—the last war. He has since come round to our way of thinking on the matter, or so I came to believe. Yet now he is there with the world’s most powerful fighting ship beneath his feet again—not just one ship this time. He has three!” Volsky read from the note again, “I am here with *Kirov*, *Orlan*, and *Admiral Golovko*. No sign of *Varyag* or the other ships from the outer screen. Our presence as yet remains unknown, but that may change. I have crept into the Sea of Okhotsk and we put men ashore with a good lock pick to deliver this note. I hope you receive it…But Admiral…How will we ever get back?”

“That note was dated August, 1945,” said Kamenski.

“Yes,” said Volsky. “Why the 1940s? We could never understand that. Why not ancient times, or the 1920s, or any other time for that matter?”

“Affinity,” said Kamenski. “That’s what our scientists on the job tell me. Things have an affinity for a certain time—particularly if they have displaced there once before. We did many experiments during those years of active nuclear testing. We learned a very great deal.”

“Yes, well now this complicates everything,” said Volsky. “We were worried about leaving one single man behind—Orlov. And then I was worried about the risk of sending three men back after him. Now it’s three *ships* I have to worry about!” He shook his head, clearly flustered. “How do I answer that last question? How in the world do they get back?”

“Perhaps they will return on their own,” suggested Kamenski. “It’s happened before, just like those technicians who witnessed Tsar Bomba. They had no Rod-25 in their back pocket, yet they showed up again in our time twelve days after they disappeared.”

“How is that possible?” asked Volsky. “Have the technicians discovered that yet?”

“Not entirely,” said Kamenski. “Perhaps time just throws back the little fish, though she has thrown back some very the big fish as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“That incident in the North Atlantic, Admiral. You told me that *Kirov* was heavily engaged by the combined British and American fleets. That was what prompted your Captain Karpov to take stronger measures, yes?”

“Regrettably,” said Volsky. “And he has come to see it that way as well, or so I believe.”

“Nonetheless…you thought the ship displaced forward again as a result of that detonation, not knowing that this Rod-25 was the real villain. But I can share another little secret with you, Admiral. When your ship vanished it was not alone.”

“Not alone?”

“You said there was a group of American destroyers involved in a gunfight with you—at fairly close range—am I correct?”

“Yes, that is so. Karpov was engaging them, and sunk several ships with our deck guns.”

“Well I’ve done a little digging on that engagement over the years. It seems that particular group was called *Desron 7*, an American destroyer flotilla. It vanished that same day *Kirov* disappeared. The crew claims they returned to their base at Argentia Bay and found the place obliterated.”

“My God!” Volsky was truly surprised now. “They saw the same future we did, then—the years after this damn war we’re so eager to fight.”

“I see,” said Kamenski. “Yes, that makes sense now, considering all you have told me. Apparently this new war of our ends quite badly, for all concerned. But the interesting thing about this incident was that the ships suddenly reappeared, twelve days after they were reported missing.”

“But how?” Volsky had a blank expression on his face now. “We used Rod-25, albeit unknowingly, but by that time we were thousands of miles away in the Med when we reappeared. That could not have affected those American destroyers. Could it?”

“I would think not. They initially shifted simply because of their close proximity to *Kirov* when it was displaced. Proximity seems to matter when these effects are considered. Our people gave this considerable thought. We don’t really know why it happens yet, but they have simply come round to the belief that certain things have an affinity for a given time. Those destroyers moved forward as your ship did, then fell back into their own time again. They tell me it has something to do with string theory and strange vibrations.” Kamenski waved his hand. “I don’t understand any of that either, Admiral.”

“How did you learn of this *Desron 7?*”

“The usual methods. The Americans tried to cover it all up, of course. They didn’t believe the story their own sailors told them, any more than the

crew of the cruiser *Tone* were believed when they returned to Truk with other wild stories of a phantom ship at sea. It's enough to drive a sane man mad—and that was the case for a good number on that ship. I followed it very closely over the years. Well, to make a long story short, the British clued the Americans in on things, and after they got the bomb they decided to see if they could duplicate the time displacement effect with a nuclear detonation. That's why they dragged all those ships out to Bikini Atoll and blasted them to hell—not to test the effects of the blast or assess damage on the ships, but to see if anything displaced in time, and to judge the radius of any possible effects. Do you understand now why everyone is so determined to restrict the spread of nuclear weapons? Their destructive power is one thing, but these odd effects are quite another."

Volsky appeared dumbfounded. "To think that this has been going on these years… Well, Mister Kamenski, do you think it will happen again like that? Will Karpov and his ships simply return to this time like the American destroyers?"

"They may…then again they may not. Who can say for sure? I will say one thing, however. We can fetch them home again by other means if necessary, and I think we should make plans to consider that possibility at once."

"By other means?" Kapustin had been following all this closely.

"With one of those control rods you have tucked away at Shkotovo-16."

"Yes!" Volsky had new life now. "I know just what we can do! My engineer Dobrynin is in the Caspian right now preparing the rescue mission for Fedorov. If this other control rod has the same effect as Rod-25, then we could send it back with him—for *Kirov* and the other ships. We could get the control rod from Severomorsk as well, if need be. If *Orlan* is with *Kirov* that ship has the new naval propulsion reactor too."

"If I understand your plan, Admiral, this Dobrynin is aboard the *Anatoly Alexandrov* in the Caspian Sea with Rod-25? But how can you be certain it will reach the same timeframe in the past as Fedorov?"

"Rod-25 has been very faithful. It seems to have an affinity, to use your term. It sends things seventy-nine years into the past—very exact."

"Well that won't do us very much good. If my math is correct that will send your engineer and the *Anatoly Alexandrov* back to the Caspian region of 1942, but your fleet is in *1945* according to this letter, and 6500 kilometers to the east in the Sea of Okhotsk! Dobrynin's people will have both a very long

journey east with this new control rod, through Soviet Russia, and a very long wait when they get there—*if* they get there."

"We would have to risk that," Volsky insisted.

"But how would you do this—from Baku to Vladivostok?"

"There is no way it could be done overland. It would have to be flown, but we can't very well take a large plane back with us when *Anatoly Alexandrov* tries this little experiment. Yet we could land a big helicopter on the roof of the *Alexandrov*, and it would most likely shift back as well. Yes…" Volsky was feeling his way through the scenario, thinking and planning.

"It would have to be a helicopter," he said definitively. "There is no other way. Our best choice would be the Mi-26, but even that has a maximum range of about 2000 kilometers on internal fuel. As you said, we're talking about a journey of 6500 kilometers from Vladivostok to Baku. The helo would have to use most of its cargo space for additional fuel, but it could be done. In fact, we could use the Mi-26TZ. That model was modified to create an airborne fuel tanker with an additional 14,000 liters of fuel in four internal tanks. We could rig four more and carry up to 28,000 liters on our newest model. Add that to the internal fuel and we should have enough to get to the east coast."

"But barely enough," said Kamenski doing some quick math.

"Once they reach the coast we can contact *Kirov* via radio and arrange a rendezvous."

"After waiting three long years," said Kamenski. "What if something happens to the ship before you can make contact?"

"We'll be there waiting when the ship arrives if all goes well."

Kamenski raised an eyebrow. "Yes… I suppose that's true."

"But one moment please," Kapustin spoke up, a confused look on his face. "You say Karpov sent this note by sending men to the naval Logistics Building in Vladivostok. Yes? Then it is clear your helicopter was *not* waiting there when the ship appeared in 1945, or at least that they failed to make contact. Am I correct in this? Does this mean this mission is doomed to fail?"

Kamenski listened, deep in thought. "Very astute, Gerasim! But Karpov *must* send his note to make the prospect of this mission possible. Otherwise how would we know where he was and dream this up? It's very confusing, but perhaps the instant Karpov sent that letter everything changed. It doesn't

sound like much, but it may have been enough to alter the entire line of causality and permit us this opportunity. Who knows for sure? Well have to let Mother Time sort it all out."

"I wish Fedorov were here," said Volsky. "He would figure all this out."

"Well, I will agree with you, Admiral. This appears to be the only way we can solve the problem if Karpov and his ships don't get home sick and return on their own. The shepherd will have to find his lost sheep! That said, waiting almost three years on the east coast will not be without risks. The Japanese had troops on the Kuriles until very late in the war. You would have to find a very isolated place, safe from discovery. Probably on Sakhalin Island, high up in the mountains. That's a long time to hold out. There's the question of food, water, and if I am not mistaken you are using the entire lift capacity of that helicopter just for fuel. Men need to eat."

"They would have to secure those supplies en-route somehow," said Volsky. "As an alternative we could take less fuel, put some fighting men on that helo, and secure a small airfield to obtain fuel en-route. It won't be top grade aviation fuel, but it would work."

"Very risky," said Kamenski. "No, I think you had best try to make it in one quick run, and with the bare minimum crew required. The fewer people we leave wandering about in the 1940s, the better. Your Mister Fedorov would certainly agree, yes? Also realize that if this mission fails we will lose those two control rods forever. That may mean nothing, however. We don't know if these other control rods will even work! They may produce no effects at all."

"Oh, I believe they will," said Kapustin.

Kamenski regarded his old friend with surprise. "What makes you so confident in that, Gerasim?"

"Because I told you, I know everything there is to know about these control rods, where they were manufactured, where they were shipped and stored, and one thing more—where the materials used in their manufacture came from…" He let that dangle, a teasing look in his eyes. Now it was his turn to reach in his pocket and pull out the missing piece of the puzzle again, and he took great satisfaction as both Kamenski and Admiral Volsky gave him their full attention.

"This is going to be very interesting," he said, folding his arms with a smile.

Part XI

Regression

"The time where we are most likely to change is when we are at the edge of the abyss. The moment of our darkest fears, that time each of us must face, is also the instant of our most brilliant clarity."

— *Kathy Bell, Regression*

Chapter 31

“Signal all fleet units to report present status,” Karpov stared at the big Plexiglas screen denoting fleet asset positions, greatly disheartened. The fleet had been rigged for nuclear, biological and chemical warfare conditions, with all hatches battened down, air filters engaged and key personnel on exposed decks outfitted in environmental suits and rebreathers. The first eruption was significant, and commanded their immediate attention, the heat of the air duel further east suddenly seeming insignificant in the face of such awesome natural power.

They had weathered the first shock wave, and some time later a thirty foot tsunami wave rolled the ship heavily, but caused no further damage. Then came the real explosion from the distant Demon on the islands to their north, one that would place it in the record books a notch above the 1815 eruption of Tambora, and the ship took another violent shockwave so intense that *Kirov* listed fifteen degrees to starboard.

The entire region was soon embroiled in a thick black cloud of pale yellow ash and silt. The falling ash soon become so dense that the morning sun was blotted out and the skies became murky gray deepening to charcoal black in places. The noise of the explosion had abated, but the skies were now scored by lightning and the rumble of thunder. A strong smell of sulfur came with the falling ash, and they encountered squalls of slurry rain. An intense hush seemed to settle over the sea, broken only by the ripple of distant thunder, as if all other sounds had been smothered by the ash fall. Visibility was near zero, their instruments were hopelessly obscured as well.

If not for the sealed citadel bridge environment with conditioned air recirculation and full NBC protocols the crew might have been suffocated in the intensely thickening ash. As it was, the line outside Dr. Zolkin’s sick bay was a long one, and crewmembers that came in reporting respiratory distress were receiving emergency oxygen. Air filters on vital equipment were soon being overwhelmed, and emergency teams were trying to clear them.

Rodenko’s systems initially went dark, then winked on fitfully again and he gave an initial report. They were returning an unreadable signal from the massive ash clouds that had covered the entire area, but in time he began to localize on nearby contacts.

“I think have signal returns on *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko,* sir. No sign of *Varyag*. This ash cloud is beginning to seriously degrade sensor performance.”

“Communications are spotty,” said Nikolin, “but I’m close enough to raise *Orlan,*”

“You mean to say you cannot raise *Golovko?”* Karpov looked over at Nikolin, unhappy.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m getting intense interference all over the band.”

“It’s the ash fall,” said Rodenko. “Byko has a team on the outer deck and reports it is all over the ship. We look like a gray lady wearing a funeral shroud. It’s three inches thick on the main decks, and every system on the superstructure is coated with the stuff. The Chief has men trying to hose down the vital sensors, but it’s difficult work in those NBC suits.”

Karpov walked to the forward view screens where the windshield wipers were smearing the ash back and forth in a blurry mess. Every window was completely coated, just as Rodenko had warned. Then Tasarov perked up, listening to his sonar headset.

“I’m not hearing it any more, sir.”

Karpov turned his head. “Hearing what, Lieutenant?”

“The eruption. I was monitoring it on the passive system with low volume, then it quieted down, so I tuned in to listen. It’s stopped, sir, unless my equipment has also failed. I hear nothing now. In fact my sonic field is completely clear.”

The bridge phone rang and Rodenko reached to answer it. He listened, his eyes registering surprise. “Chief Byko says conditions are clearing, sir. We can secure from NBC conditions and resume normal operations.”

“Clearing?” Karpov found that hard to believe given the size of the eruption they had seen. He was still peering through the muddied view screen, frustrated. “Activate Tin Man One and pan north,” he said, and Nikolin immediately toggled a switch to feed power to the system.

“Getting a picture now, sir.”

The digital feed was spotty, breaking up into checkered squares and reassembling again, but after a moment the image settled down.

“There’s *Admiral Golovko,”* said Karpov. “But my God, look at the sea conditions! And the sky—Byko was correct. There’s no sign of any disturbance at all.”

A few moments ago they were sailing in the massive ash fall shadow of a

VEI Level 7 Ultra-Plinian Super-Colossal volcanic eruption, with tsunami driven seas and ashen skies that blotted out the sun itself, sending them into a limbo of brimstone and pumice—but now they were cruising on quiet seas, with a strange tinge of green fire in the ocean, and pristine white cumulus clouds in an azure blue sky. The distant silhouette of the Kuriles was calm and undisturbed. There was no sign of the eruption at all!

Karpov's momentary shock soon gave way to instant recognition. "My God," he said. "Not again…Look at the sea Rodenko. Look at the sky!"

The ship's Radar Chief and new *Starpom* was staring up at the screen, dumbfounded. "That eruption was nearly forty kilometers high by my last signal returns. No way you can put that genie back in the bottle, sir. We've…"

"We've move in *time* again," said Karpov. "How is that possible? That reactor control rod isn't even on the damn ship!" Even as he asked the question he knew the why of it all would likely be a confounding mystery, just as it was the first time this happened. The question he needed to be asking now was not why, but *when*. That thought went from mind to lips as Karpov removed his hat, wiping the sheen of perspiration from his brow.

"Where have we ended up this time? Is this the future we saw before, or the past?"

One thing was certain, the present was gone, the war itself went up in cinders the moment the Demon vented its wrath. The eruption made the petty quarrels of humans seem totally insignificant. Yet now they had all been dragged into an old and all too familiar nightmare again… somewhere… somewhere in time…

* * *

He went to Zolkin, the man who was ever his foil and a prickling barb of conscience on the ship. He was the man who mended the crew's woes, both physical and mental, bandaging up their souls as much as anything else. The Doctor had every intention of leaving the ship for private practice in Vladivostok, but when duty called and the fleet sailed he knew his place was aboard *Kirov*. Now Karpov sat with him in the sick bay, so many questions on his mind, though Zolkin had a few of his own.

"How did it happen this time? I thought they took that wizard's brew off the ship."

“They did, but the detonation of that volcano north of our position seems to have blown us half way through the last century again.”

“What year is it? Have you found that out yet?”

“I went down to Fedorov’s quarters and fetched a copy of that book he often referred to—the *Chronology of the Naval War at Sea.* We’ve learned the US fleet has been attacking the Japanese home islands the last several days, so I looked that up and compared the narrative to information we’ve picked up on radio. I believe it may be the 15th of August, 1945. We must be somewhere in that timeframe, or so I reckon it.”

“Good then, the war is nearly over. The surrender of Japan was accepted in Tokyo Bay about that time, was it not?”

“August 27th, in Sagami Bay, if Fedorov’s book is accurate.”

“I thought everything was different because of our meddling.”

“Not exactly. Fedorov tried to explain it to me once. He said it was like a cracked mirror—the changes we make in the history. The rest of the mirror is perfect, and reflects events down to the finest detail, but wherever there is a crack the image is distorted. I have no idea how badly cracked that mirror is now, Doctor. Each time we do something the cracks spread further, but the portion I am peering into at the moment seems to be accurate. We’ve heard the names of many vessels listed in US fleet units.”

“Well, with the war over I hope they’ll be going home soon and perhaps we’ll be left in peace.”

“Perhaps…” Karpov had a distant look in his eye, one part loneliness, one part despair, and yet behind it was a flicker of dark energy that always seemed to animate his mind. Zolkin noticed it at once.

“What’s on your mind, Captain?”

“I’ll put it as simply as I can, Doctor. I don’t think we can count on that volcano on Iturup Island blowing its top any time soon. For all I know Volsky must think that Demon wiped us off the map. That it did, but it sent us to this private little purgatory again, perhaps to atone for our sins.”

“It certainly seems that way.”

“The point is—we can’t get back this time. We have no magic wand. Dobrynin took Rod-25 to the Caspian to look for Fedorov in 1942. We’re stranded here.”

“Not necessarily,” Zolkin finished cleaning some oxygen dispensers with alcohol and was drying his hands with a towel as he spoke. “Suppose they found Fedorov, went home with Orlov and all the rest, then they would have

that control rod to come back for us."

"And suppose Fedorov and all the rest have been blown to hell already in 2021," Karpov put in quickly. "That was no picnic I was invited to when I took the fleet to sea."

"I understand you had quite an engagement with the Americans—yes, I heard the missiles going off, and saw the *Varyag* when they fired. Who knows how many were killed in that little argument."

"Who knows," said Karpov dryly, detecting just the hint of criticism in the Doctor's voice. "The fact is we don't know much at all. We can speculate, but there is no way of knowing what happened to Fedorov or Orlov now, and no way of knowing what happened to Volsky in 2021. Yes, I think I gave the Americans a bit of a black eye in that engagement. It was either that or they put us at the bottom of the sea, and in that equation morality has little room, Doctor. I'm willing to bet the Americans will want their pound of flesh in reprisal. Volsky's position at Fokino is somewhat precarious. I wouldn't be surprised if the Americans don't have their B-2s in the air with bellies full of missiles to take those facilities out. That's what I would have done."

"So what are you going to do now?"

Karpov sat quietly for a moment, thinking to himself. "I suppose we should at least try to signal Volsky as to what happened."

"And just how do you propose to do that?

"The same way Fedorov planned it. He was to write us a letter and slip it into an old locker in the Naval Logistics Building. I can ease over toward Vladivostok and get men ashore there to do the same thing."

Zolkin had not heard any of this before. "And this locker remains undisturbed for almost eighty years?"

"That's what Fedorov claims. If I can get a message into that locker, then Volsky has men there waiting to check it every night."

"Amazing!" Zolkin shook his head. "That young Fedorov is ingenious."

"A fine officer," said Karpov. "But beyond letting Volsky know we're alive, I don't know what good my plan will do. There's a war on, and we were the heart of the fleet. Now we're gone. I managed to hurt one of the American carrier task forces but they have two more unfought, and another two in their Third Fleet on the West coast. All Volsky has left without us is the *Varyag*, a couple *Udaloys*, *Admiral Kuznetsov* and a few subs. They won't last another week."

“I hate to break it to you but adding this ship and the other two here to that mix would not amount to much either. *Kirov* is a good ship, but the US Navy is something more, I fear.”

“You are probably correct. It was a futile show of force, but Moscow ordered it and so…”

“I know that drill only too well,” Zolkin wagged a finger at him. “You must have learned enough by now to use you head, Karpov. What Moscow wants is seldom for the general good—at least that’s been my experience in recent decades, not to mention in this war ending right here.”

“We had hoped to find a way to prevent it,” said Karpov, the frustration evident in his voice. “I’m not sure why Fedorov was so damn set on this Orlov business. Well, either he succeeded, or he failed. The point is—we may never know either way.”

“What then?” Zolkin held out a hand. “What are you going to do, Captain, look for an island as Volsky planned? You say it’s August? I hear the weather isn’t too bad up on Sakhalin this time of year.”

Karpov gave him a wan smile. “There’s another consideration, Doctor.” His tone indicated that he was finally getting round to business—to the reason why he had come here in the first place.

“You have another idea?”

“Consider this,” Karpov began. “In just a few days virtually the entire American Fleet is going to be anchored in Sagami Bay; the British Pacific Fleet as well. Now the way I see things is that this volcano upset the porridge bowl. The fact that my ships were sent here was completely random, and it occurred only because of the decisions Admiral Volsky and I made to sortie with the fleet. So we’ve done it again.”

“Done what?”

“We’ve *changed* things, shuffled the deck. *Kirov’s* presence here is going to cause another major alteration to the history from this day forward. So since we have already changed the course of events, then we may as well finish the job.”

“Finish the job?”

“Look, Doctor, think clearly now. You know what happens from here on out, yes? The US and Britain ride roughshod over the rest of the world. The cold war has already started. MacArthur is shitting his pants to think the Soviets here might occupy northern Japan. They’ll wear us down for fifty years until it all collapses, and then by 2021 we’re going to be fighting the

Americans for our lives again. It's going to happen, one way or another...Unless I stop it."

"Unless *you* stop it? Forgive me, Captain, but you are beginning to sound like your old self again. What are you suggesting?"

"Their entire fleet is there. All the dignitaries are going to meet on the battleship *Missouri* and watch Japan surrender."

"So what's on your mind? Are you going to sail into Sagami Bay with these three ships? And then what?"

"I haven't decided that yet."

Zolkin gave him a long look. "You're serious? You are actually considering intervention here? I thought we went over and over this on the ship when Volsky was here."

"That was different. We didn't know about the next war then. Now we know—the world is going to be blown to hell unless we *do* something about it. To be frank I didn't think there was much *Kirov* could do in the year 2021 to forestall that. Volsky said it would eventually come down to blood and steel, the old fashioned way, but those things have obvious limitations. When they took that thing off the ship—Rod-25—I'll admit I felt strangely deflated, mortal again, if that makes any sense. Yet it's happened again, and who knows why. Here we are again, an order of magnitude more powerful than any ship afloat. In fact, considering that we received a new allotment of heavy weapons, we are more powerful than that entire fleet out there."

"Heavy weapons? You mean *nuclear* weapons, don't you." Zolkin folded his arms, clearly unhappy. "So it's come round to this old song and dance again. What are you thinking to do, threaten the United States Pacific Fleet with annihilation? Well if I'm not mistaken the Americans have a few atomic weapons of their own by this time, don't they. So what are you going to do, Karpov, start a nuclear war here so we can avoid a bigger one later?"

"That would make sense, Doctor, at least from a military perspective."

"Make sense? It's insane, Captain. Yes, you are a man of war, and I'm a physician. But this isn't a garden we're talking about here. This isn't a matter of nipping something in the bud before the weeds spread too far. You're talking about killing people now. Realize that—murdering thousands if they won't accede to your demands. I can assure you that they won't take kindly to you if you try to crash their party, nor will they allow you to push them around. They've just won the goddamned Second World War, Karpov! Now you come sailing up and want to start the third."

“I can see it’s futile discussing this with you,” said Karpov. “But if it will calm you down I will say that nothing has been decided yet. I want to meet with the Captains of *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko* first and discuss the matter. Remember, they have no idea what has happened—no idea at all.”

“If the sudden change of weather hasn’t clued them in, then they’ll find out soon enough on the radio, just as you did.”

“I’ve already signaled them and ordered complete radio silence. Right now they are busy washing the ash and silt from that monster volcano off the decks and equipment. This evening I will receive Captains Ryakhin and Yeltsin here in the officer’s dining hall for a briefing. Then we will decide what to do.”

“May I attend?”

“If you wish. I came to you to seek your opinion. We’ve had our differences before, Zolkin; there’s no question about that. You may speak your mind, but if we make a decision that you disagree with, be man enough to keep your place and don’t make a fuss about it.”

Zolkin looked Karpov in the eye. “If you think I’ll sit here like a good little Doctor and watch you drop another atomic weapon on Sagami Bay, then you’re not only a madman, but a fool. I’ll scream bloody hell!”

“Look Doctor, no one said anything about bombing Sagami Bay. Please don’t get hysterical and force me to confine you to quarters. The men need you.”

“You have already tried that trick once with Volsky, Captain. What did it get you?”

“Volsky isn’t even *born* yet!” The venom in Karpov’s voice told Zolkin more than the words. “Get that through you head, eh? I admit I was a fool to do what I did last time, but circumstances have changed. If we are to prevent the future we saw, then we have to act. Can’t you see that? You think I can avoid detection indefinitely out here? They’re going to find out about us, and my guess is that when they do they’ll come in shooting first. They’ll assume we’re a renegade Japanese ship this time.”

“Only if you start taking shots at their ships.”

“You said it yourself, Doctor. They just won the damn war. They’ll come sailing up with demands and orders, and I’m not one to be pushed right now. If they get in my face, they’ll regret it.”

“And then you get your war…”

Zolkin sighed heavily, imposing a measure of calm on himself. “I guess it

is true what they say, that a leopard never changes its spots. I was proud of you, Karpov. We all were. You were in the most difficult situation imaginable, and you redeemed yourself admirably. Now… show me the real man in there. Who are you? The real man had better take hold of himself, and damn soon, because he's wearing Captain's bars and standing on a ship that can blow the world to hell and back with the push of a button!"

Karpov looked down, obviously conflicted, yet torn. The siren's song of time was singing loudly to him now, calling him to glory, and to unimaginable power. Yet Zolkin's voice scored him, touching the old wounds that he had struggled to heal in the months past. What would he do?

"Dinner is tonight at zero-six-hundred hours," he said quietly. "You are invited."

Then he set his cap on his forehead, nodded to Zolkin and stepped out the hatch.

Chapter 32

Mack Morgan sat with his head in his hands, thinking. “Now what are those Russian bastards up to in the Caspian?”

He had been receiving decrypts on the Russian military channels. Their super secret *Oracle* decrypt system had been laboring all through the night to decode the traffic, and something was up. The Russians had begun moving assets off shore near Makhachkala and their naval base at Kaspiysk. It looked like they were busy activating a large floating nuclear power facility there, the *Anatoly Alexandrov.* But the other assets involved aroused his curiosity. They had small patrol craft, fast hovercraft, a company of naval marines, and now a most unusual addition with the Mi-26 helicopter, which landed on the flat reinforced upper helipad on the *Alexandrov*.

He twisted a few arms to get some very valuable time on a satellite and was able to obtain a few decent high resolution images. “Will you look at that,” he breathed. The Russkies are loading fuel into that helo, or I’m deaf, dumb and blind, he thought. This looks like the makings of a Spetsnaz operation, and the list of potential targets available in this region is short and sweet. Where could they be going?

He did some thinking. That Mi-26 was a good long range work horse. It could get out almost 2000 kilometers, so why the big load of extra fuel? They would only need that if they planned to exceed that range. Suppose they double it…He was looking at a very big circle on his map, realizing the mission could be going anywhere from Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. Hell, they could fly all the way to Rome after landing to refuel. What were they up to?

He decided he had better notify Miss Fairchild, and also get word to the Argonauts they had deployed to the Kashagan oil fields. Perhaps they could use one of the X-3s to keep an eye on the situation. Then he turned his attention to the other troubling matter that morning—the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

That little Georgian Coast Guard patrol had been brushed off easily enough, but now the Russian fleet was moving out from its bases to the north, and that was going to mean trouble. They had already overflown the tanker loading operation once the previous day with a drone, and undoubtedly knew

what was going on there. Two and a half million barrels of oil was a very valuable commodity just now. The Russians were obviously trying to shut down all export routes for oil to the West. They were leaning on Georgian government, and this latest move looked ominous. The spot market price per barrel had just surged through the $200 mark and would likely go higher.

It'll be $300 a barrel in short order, he thought. Fairchild is going to make a killing on this haul, if we can only manage to get the damn oil safely out of the Black Sea. Something tells me that fleet up north is going to have something to say about it soon enough. I'd best let Gordie MacRae know we're about to have company. He reached for his intercom, a troubled look clouding his dark eyes.

On the Bridge of *Argos Fire* Captain MacRae was well aware of the Russians. His long range radar was very good with the Sampson system scouring the region, and even better when augmented by the SM1850M2 addition, which enhanced the ship's coverage even against ballistic missile threats from the edge of space. The Russian fleet was moving, and Mack Morgan was worried about it.

MacRae had *Iron Duke* further out in a single ship picket now that *Princess Irene* was topped off and heading south. An older Type 23 Frigate, the *Iron Duke* had seen several upgrades to extend her active service, particularly with the addition of new radar sets and a better medium range air defense missile, the *Sea Ceptor*. That missile replaced the older *Seawolf* system, giving the frigate a modest AAW umbrella out to 25 kilometers.

"Mack says they're sailing with the best they have," said Commander Dean. "Those three new frigates, *Grigorovich*, *Essen* and *Makarov* put out to sea an hour ago. It looks like they may throw an old *Krivak* or two into the mix as well. *Vorovskiy* was operating in their border guard unit, and that's probably the best of that lot."

"Where are they headed, Mister Dean?"

"We have our last X-3 up watching them and returns are being fed to our systems here. The heading is due south, speed twenty."

"They don't seem to be in any hurry."

"No sir, but even at that speed they can assume a position to intercept us when we head west in just two hours. We'll be well within range of their SA-N-27 *Sizzlers*, and the *Onyx* system as well."

MacRae thought for a moment. "This situation is very delicate at the moment," he said. "Technically the Russians and Americans are in the thick

of things in the Pacific. Britain is a NATO ally and therefore would be considered hostile."

"And what about the Turks, sir? *Iron Duke* says she's tracking a Turkish sub out there, S-354, the *Sakarya."*

"Don't worry about the Turks, Mister Dean, they're in it with NATO too."

"But can we count on Turkish support, sir? They can match or beat the Russian Black Sea Fleet out here."

"That they can, and I believe certain arrangements have been made, if you follow me. That sub out there will throw in on our side if need be, and the Turks have promised us two frigates when we start heading west."

"That's welcome news, sir."

"Aye, but Morgan says the Russians threw everything they had at the Americans this morning. Then that bloody volcano blew its top and we've heard nothing since. Thing is this, laddie. If the Russians decide to engage here, then you can bet they'll hit us with everything they have as well. They don't have enough of a fleet here to last out the week, if it comes down to it, but they can make our life miserable, particularly if they shoot first and ask questions later."

"I understand, sir."

MacRae looked at his watch. "They've rigged up two more lines and the pumps have been working overtime. We'll have a couple million barrels under our belts in another hour. Then there's this business in the Caspian. I don't much like the fact that we've three of our X-3s and good men out there. There's no way we can protect either Chevron or BP operations in those oil fields. Now Mack Morgan seems a wee bit flustered over something the Russians have going at Kaspiysk. He thinks he sees a Special Ops mission staging there, and what else would they be looking to bother out there but those oil fields?"

"Sounds logical, sir."

"And a bloody cold logic at that. Well, the thing is this, Mister Dean. If they move on those fields any time soon the Argonauts will be in a bar fight there. I'd just as soon have those men with us. We've got our oil. Let's bring the lads home."

"Very well, sir. Chevron won't be happy about it."

"Chevron doesn't write my paycheck, Mister Dean, nor yours either."

"Aye, sir."

MacRae was pacing now, walking slowly back and forth on the bridge as he considered the situation. But he didn't have much time to think about it. His Sampson air alert operator called out 'Top One,' a single aircraft inbound on their position.

"What is it, Mister Conners?"

"Single contact, Mach one at 20,000 feet. Probably an Su-24, sir."

"One plane?"

"Aye, sir. Range is 186 miles and closing. If it's packing heat it can fire in five minutes."

"Then we go to full Air Alert. Is *Iron Duke* tracking it, Mister Boyle?"

"Sir, Comm signals indicate affirmative. They have a live track but have not locked on missile targeting radars."

"Very well."

MacRae decided to wait. If the Russians were attacking, it would not be with a single plane. *Iron Duke* was out there with her *Sea Ceptor*s, and fully capable of handling the situation, but she wasn't locking on. This was most likely a recon flight, though it was rather ballsy, he thought. Then again….All it would take is for us to give this single plane a pass and have it pump a missile into one of those tankers out there. All's fair in love and war. My charge is to defend these ships at any cost.

"Mister Boyle," he said calmly. "Contact that plane and tell them if they come within fifty kilometers of this operation we must assume hostile intent and will act accordingly."

"Aye, Sir!" Boyle was quick to it, and always by the book.

"That'll give them something to think about," said MacRae. "They'll have to be wondering if that means *Iron Duke* out there, or us. Either way we're one and the same. Let's see what they do."

The Russians didn't think long.

At a range of 100 kilometers the situation took a dramatic turn when the Russian plane fired a pair of missiles. Seconds later the Sampson system had identified them as Kh-58U Anti Radiation missiles for targeting radars.

MacRae was truly surprised. "What in bloody hell are they doing?" he said aloud.

"*Iron Duke* is locking on, sir. They're firing a barrage of *Sea Ceptors*." Britain's newest air defense missile was firing from VLS quad packs installed on the frigate's forward deck. The Duke fired four, and the speedy missiles were out after the incoming targets in a heartbeat, two for each of the missiles

fired by the SU-24."

"I'll want our *Vipers* up, and ready immediately," MacRae said to Dean, who relayed the order loud and clear. "CIC, activate forward deck *Sea Viper* system and standby"

"Aye, sir, *Vipers* up and ready. Sampson reports hard lock and steady track on all contacts."

"Con, Top Seven! I have additional contacts inbound at low altitude." There were suddenly seven more Su-24's inbound, and behind them another seven, and now MacRae knew the gloves were finally coming off.

"Mister Dean," he said. "What are we looking at in terms of Russian naval air power out here."

"Sir, I checked that this morning. Their 43rd Independent Naval *Shturmovik* Air Assault Squadron in the Crimea was listed as having twenty-two SU-24s. Four of those are tactical recon variants, but these have to be the strike squadrons."

"And they thought they were going to bother my Sampson system with a forty year old radar seeker?"

The Sampson air defense radar system was perhaps the best in the world. In trials and war games it even exceeded the capabilities of the US AEGIS system. US naval officers had commented that the British air defense destroyers were no less than awesome, capable of tracking up to 1000 targets at any one time.

The situation had taken a sudden and dramatic turn. The Russians were trying to launch a surprise attack, and his tankers were just sitting there like big fat ducks, still tethered to their loading buoys and hoses.

"What will those strike planes be carrying?"

"Sir, this isn't a dedicated naval strike plane. It's a ground attack aircraft, but that said they might be using a variant of the Kh-58 in an anti-shipping role. Or else this is just a SEAD mission to get after our radar before their fleet gets into it."

It was indeed. Air Alert One called out a barrage of fourteen incoming missiles, followed within seconds by a second barrage. The Russians had taken advantage of the nebulous thin border zone at the edge of any impending conflict to get in the opening salvo. It was ingrained in Russian military thinking—fire first.

"Sir!" said Ensign Boyle. "I have Captain Williams of *Iron Duke* on a secure channel."

MacRae reached for the overhead handset and thumbed it on. *"We're going hot,"* said Williams. *"Just thought I'd let you know."*

"We can hear you singing, Captain," said MacRae, "and we'll squeeze the pipes for you."

"Very well, Argos. Good shooting."

The *Argos Fire* and Fairchild & Company were now at war. Everything that came before was mere posturing and bluster. Missiles inbound on over two million barrels of oil were another thing entirely.

"Well lads," said MacRae. "We're in it for certain now. Air One, prosecute your contacts, and be quick about it."

"Sir, aye sir!"

Where there had once been a flat and empty deck forward of the stealth turret *Argos* had raised earlier, there was now a series of open hatches harboring deadly *Sea Vipers*, the Fairchild modified version of the Aster 30 SAM. It was fast at Mach 4.5, and extremely agile, being capable of 60-G maneuvers. *Argos Fire* had a battery of 60 of these missiles, more even than the standard British *Daring* class destroyer would carry. They were going to need them.

The action was short and violent. The *Iron Duke's* advanced *Sea Ceptors* were quick to their targets, and she had four times her old air defense firepower with a single quad-pack occupying the space that one of her older *Seawolf* missiles might have taken. They were able to find and swat down the two anti-radiation missiles that led the attack, and the plane that fired them died soon after.

The *Sea Ceptors* had a limited range of only 25 kilometers, but within that envelope they were fast and deadly. The Russian planes had fired and were not sticking around to do any battle damage assessment. The SU-24 *Fencers* made an abrupt about face and were racing north again for their base in the Crimea, too far away to be bothered by *Iron Duke's* missiles. But the doughty frigate was firing furiously at the incoming barrage of Ka-58s. The British built systems were a generation or more ahead of the attacking ordnance. Of the twenty-eight missiles fired, *Iron Duke* got eighteen and the *Argos Fire* downed the rest. Not a single missile got through.

"What was that all about?" said Commander Dean. "It was too damn easy."

"Don't be surprised that our missiles perform as advertised, Mister Dean," said MacRae. "But all things considered, I know what you're saying."

“I would have coordinated that attack with their surface action group,” said Dean. “That was nothing more than a shoot and scoot.”

MacRae, folded his arms, one hand raised to his chin as he considered what Dean was saying. “Well the thing is this, lad. They lost one plane and a few old missiles, but everything we sent up after them was a nice, shiny *new* missile. All the Russians did is rush in and flash their kilts at us. We’re just two ships out here, and there’s only so many missiles under that forward deck. We just fired ten *Sea Vipers*, by my count, and we’re a long way from home. My guess is that those planes will be back again soon. They pulled a few teeth, then, didn’t they?”

The bridge phone rang, and MacRae turned to see it was line one, the executive offices. “That will be her majesty,” he said to Dean, smiling. “She’ll want to know what we were shooting at. Let’s get the Argonauts home at once and wind this operation up.”

Before he had a chance to take the call his Sampson air alert system was calling out a new threat. “Sir, I have incoming missiles, high and slow.”

Dean looked at the readout, raising an eyebrow. “SA-N-27 *Sizzlers*,” he said. “They’re the only missiles with the range to hit us down here. Well they won’t be high and slow for very long. Get them now, during their sub-sonic cruise approach phase. They’ll come down on the deck for their terminal run and accelerate with Mach 2 or better, dancing like faeries the whole way in.”

MacRae nodded as he picked up the handset, quickly explaining the situation to an anxious Miss Fairchild.

“I understand, Captain. Defend the company, and may God be with us. But I have another request—I’m afraid I’ll have to make it an order, Gordon.”

That was unusual for her to call him by his first name on the ship’s internal comm system. She usually reserved such familiarity for the sanctity of her offices.

“Madame?”

“Those helicopters we have in the Caspian…Can they fight?”

“That they can, Madame, but I was considering bringing the lads home, seeing as though the situation here is changing rapidly, and not for the good. We’ll need to move west as soon as possible.”

He listened, surprised by what he heard next, his features set and serious. There had been a call to the executive offices—a very special call. It had come in on the secure red phone that was answered only by Elena Fairchild

herself, though MacRae knew of its existence. He also knew that when "special calls" came in from time to time, they were always followed by "special orders." Yet what he heard now was going to complicate his life in ways he could not possibly imagine.

"That operation in the Caspian Mack Morgan was fussing over," she said. *"Well we're going to pay them a little visit. Come to my office when you can and I'll discuss the matter further."*

"Very well," said MacRae, hanging up the phone with the shake of his head, completely nonplussed.

Now what in seven hells is this about? I've got missiles inbound, *Vipers* ready to get out after them, and more trouble than a banshee in a basket right now!

It was going to be a very long day.

Chapter 33

They had their meeting in the officer's mess that night, and Karpov watched the blood slowly drain from the face of the other two Captains. First there were smiles, as if he were telling them a good joke to relieve the tension of their situation. Then came the uncomfortable shifting in the seats, the looks of irritation and obvious frustration. *Vranyo* was *vranyo,* the little lies the Russians would stretch into stories with one another, and there were forms and protocols that had to be adhered to, but this was a little much considering what they had just been through.

Ryakhin and Yeltsin found themselves looking from Karpov to Zolkin and back again, clearly confused as to what was going on. It had taken the officers and crew of *Kirov* a good long while to come to grips with the fact that they had actually moved in time, and this even after being overflown by WWII class aircraft and encountering ships at sea that had long since been given to the scrap yards.

Ryakhin was a strait laced man, young, proud, having made Captain of the second rank just before the outbreak of hostilities. He was now commanding the new fleet frigate *Admiral Golovko,* a promising young officer who was given one of Russia's newest ships. Yeltsin was older, more wizened, a Captain of the first rank as Karpov was. He knew Karpov from the academy and was somewhat leery of him. The stories he had heard of the man were none too flattering, but he was not one to dwell on gossip.

Both men slowly closed up, arms folded, eyes averted, and clearly unwilling to be led much further down the pathway Karpov was dragging them. Zolkin said nothing, thinking things through and watching the other men react to what Karpov was telling them.

"Yes," said Karpov. "It sounds impossible, even crazy to even consider. Believe me, I felt the same way when *Kirov* first disappeared. But you will have the testimony of every man aboard this ship as to the truth of this. Doctor Zolkin here can attest to everything I am saying."

Yeltsin looked up, thinking before he spoke, his lids heavy, a sheen of light perspiration on his brow and balding head. "Doctor? Please tell me this is all a nice little after dinner joke." He smiled, but barely, casting a sideward glance at Karpov.

“I wish it were so,” said Zolkin. “But I’m afraid that what the Captain here has told you is the truth—at least insofar as we knew and lived it. It took us days to comprehend what had happened to us. For some aboard this ship it is still a dilemma.”

Karpov waved the orderly over and whispered something. “I have taken the liberty of arranging a little demonstration,” he said.

The orderly soon returned pushing a small cart with a video monitor and player. He also brought a bottle of good vodka and was pouring the officers a glass as Karpov explained what they would soon see.

“I am about to replay a visual log recording from the bridge of *Kirov*,” he said calmly. “Yes, I know such things might be created in Hollywood studios, but I assure you, we did not set sail with the Red Banner Fleet just now with the intention of filming a movie. You will both recognize the formatting of this footage, as you have undoubtedly reviewed many similar digital logs in your years of service. What you are about to see now was recorded on a warm late summer day…in the year 1942.” It was from the log records they had hidden before Kapustin’s inspection.

He pressed the remote and the screen came alive. The camera was recording off the port side of the ship, and from the bow wave, it was clearly evident that *Kirov* was running at high rate of speed. Then they heard the whistle of falling ordnance and saw a sudden geyser of seawater exploding up from the sea. The voice of Admiral Volsky, unmistakable, was recognized by both men at once.

“Engage all airborne targets! Weapons free!”

“Sir—I have no radar locks!”

“Nothing?”

“No data, sir.”

“What are we fighting, Fedorov?” Karpov’s voice was heard now.

“Aichi D3A1—Dive bombers! High angle attack. They will come in from a cruising altitude between ten and fifteen thousand meters. Right on top of us!”

They could hear the drone of the diving planes growing louder in the background, and a second bomb splash fell closer, the explosion clearly imaged on camera in an angry geyser of seawater not fifty meters off the port side of the ship.

Karpov’s voice was heard again, loud and strong.

“Helm, ahead full battle speed! Samsonov, Kashtan system! High

azimuth arc. Target zone zenith plus and minus ten degrees and fire all systems. Full missile barrage! Use infrared!"

"Aye, sir!"

The resulting action was filmed by the Tin Man cameras, and as the *Kashtan* close in defense system rotated its arms upwards Karpov noted how the two other officers leaned forward, spellbound as they watched the action unfold. The missiles ignited in a wash of white steamy smoke and danced into the sky above. Then another bomb fell just ahead of the ship and sent a wild spray of seawater over the bow. They saw *Kirov* roll heavily as she ran over the detonation, her sharp prow cutting through the seething water.

"Samsonov! Gatling system on full automatic! Now!"

They heard the snarl of the Gatling guns join the cacophony of noise as the *Kashtans* fired thousands of rounds of 30mm shells from their heavy arms, their muzzles spitting out enormous fiery jets of flame.

Yeltsin's mouth opened in amazement as he watched. This was no live fire exercise, and nothing remotely like it could have been staged. It was riveting, tense and heartless combat, the like of which few other officers in the fleet had ever known…and it was clearly real. They could almost smell the smoke and feel the heat of the battle scene they were watching. Then the camera jiggled wildly and they heard a deafening explosion. Karpov squeezed the remote and paused the video.

"That was live combat footage of an engagement fought with this ship off the coast of Australia shortly after we displaced in time to the year 1942. We were clearly not prepared for action, as the ship's systems were affected by the time displacement, as your systems were in recent hours. Yes, it was not only the volcanic ash. The shift in time caused a momentary loss of long range sensor systems. That's how those planes could get right on top of us without our knowing about it. Otherwise we would have cut them to pieces before they ever got near us. Oh yes…Those were Japanese naval dive bombers referred to in that footage. As you saw, I had to take command and repel the attack with the *Kashtan* system."

He thumbed the remote, and the segment skipped ahead. The voice of admiral Volsky was heard again.

"Mister Karpov."

"Sir?"

"Come here, please…Mister Karpov, I gave Samsonov an order to engage those aircraft, weapons free."

“Yes, sir, but I thought—”

“Just a moment, Captain Lieutenant, if you please…Look here, this man intervened in a critical moment, overriding my spoken orders, and he saved the ship just now. My orders were unclear. I specified no weapon system, yet Captain Karpov immediately assessed the situation and selected the only weapon system that could have possibly engaged the enemy given the angle of this attack, and he saved the ship. I have long believed that Captain Karpov was one of the finest tactical combat officers in the fleet.”

The segment ended, and Karpov folded his arms, watching the other Captains closely. “That explosion you heard at the last segment was a bomb from one of those planes that struck the ship on the aft citadel. The damage there was extensive, and we will take a little tour to show you after dessert.”

Zolkin noted how the Captain had edited the segment to end with the Admiral’s praise for his performance in the engagement, and he could clearly see that Karpov was fighting another battle now, one for the proverbial ‘hearts and minds’ of these two Captains. He would have to win here if he was to do anything more in this insane situation they found themselves in again. The Doctor could see the glimmer of uncertainty in the younger man’s eyes—Ryakhin. The more seasoned Yeltsin seemed deep in thought, but the footage had wiped the uncomfortable smiles of restrained disbelief from both men’s faces. They were clearly impressed by what they had seen and heard.

“Those ship’s logs are top secret,” said Karpov. “I showed them to you to give you something more than my own testimony to convince you of the truth here. It will be somewhat disturbing, I realize, even shocking. You will doubt either your own sanity or mine and that of the Doctor here. But the fact remains that we are where we are. Lieutenant Nikolin, our communications officer, has intercepted radio traffic to confirm the present day and year. It is the 15th of August, 1945.”

“Astounding,” said Yeltsin.

“Indeed, Captain. That footage clearly illustrates one other thing—this is a very dangerous place. The war here has ended, but the combined allied fleet is arriving in Sagami Bay near Tokyo in just a few days for the surrender of Japan. This is the same fleet we just engaged, albeit in another time—our own time. Yet the both of you know as well as I do that we will bump gunwales with the Americans at sea from this time forward, until it comes to what we just saw some hours ago and the missiles fly. They will be at our throats, one way or another.”

Zolkin could see he was angling to make his pitch now, the Captain on maneuvers, ready to fire.

"Now…" Karpov paused, looking the other men over. "Ours is to decide what we do about all this."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Yeltsin spoke, his voice still tentative. "You say we have…we have moved in *time?"*

"Captain…did you happen to notice the sudden change of weather? One minute we were sailing on the seas of hell. The Americans were attacking and their *Harpoons* were coming in at us from two sides. Then that mountain blew up. You saw the ash cloud. It was three inches think on the main deck! Now where is it? Where is that massive eruption to the north? Did you think a gentle breeze could just blow that all away in a few minutes?"

He had obviously hit on something that was very convincing. Ryakhin leaned forward. "Yes, that was very unusual. We could not understand what had happened."

"The explosive force from that eruption was apparently so severe that it knocked us into the past," said Karpov quickly. "This is how we figure it. When this happened to *Kirov* earlier—when *Orel* blew up—we were also displaced in time."

"How did you get back?"asked Yeltsin.

Karpov pursed his lips, jaw set. This was the key question. He had to tell these men their bridges were burned now. How would they react?

"Chief Engineer Dobrynin noticed an anomaly taking place in our nuclear reactors. It came and went. Whenever it occurred our position in time was unstable. It so happened that on one occasion we were returned to our own time, and we came home."

"Will that happen again?"

"We don't know…"

Zolkin could see Karpov was straying a bit here. He told the men nothing of Rod-25, or the fact that the ship found a way to trigger the time displacement on their own. Karpov glanced at him, as if checking to see if the Doctor would protest, then continued.

"The fact is that this is all still a mystery to us. Yet it happened, and now it has happened again. Captain Ryakhin, your frigate uses a diesel and gas turbine powerplant, so there is no chance your ship could return to our time as *Kirov* did through some anomaly in the reactor. Captain Yeltsin, your ship is fortunate to have the nuclear power upgrade planned as an option for our

new destroyers. We will send you technical data to alert your engineers on what they should look for. Perhaps the anomaly will occur again, but the more likely case is that it will not."

"Then what becomes of my ship and crew?" asked Ryakhin.

"Don't worry Captain. We have discovered that it may be possible for your vessel to move with *Kirov*, if you are in close proximity to our ship when it happens. That said, we cannot count on any of this. All we know for certain is that we are here, impossible as it seems. I will tell you, Captain Ryakhin, that we will not abandon you by choice. I give you my word on that. We will stand by you, come what may…which brings me to my next point."

Here it comes, thought Zolkin. The deck hatches were opening in Karpov's mind and the Moskit-IIs were ready to fire.

"It may be that we are all stranded here in this time indefinitely; that we may *never* find a way to return to the year 2021. In fact, it would be wise for us to assume as much, and act accordingly for our own survival. So I ask the question again—now that we are here, what do we do?"

The two Captains were quite disturbed, but neither man said anything for some time. Then Yeltsin spoke up. "Do about what, Captain?"

There was a glint in Karpov's eye as he spoke. "The Americans and British have just won this war—or so they believe. They will conveniently overlook the fact that it was Soviet Russia that truly defeated Germany. If our Mister Fedorov were here he would tell you all about it, but we all know the truth from the history books. We carried the real burden of the war in Europe and *we* beat the Germans. Our only thanks was fifty years of Cold War. Now… We are only three ships, all that is left of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet for all we know. The world we left just a few hours ago may be obliterated—in fact, we have evidence that this will indeed happen. So in some way we can see our present situation as a reprieve—a second chance."

"And what do you suggest, Karpov," Zolkin had been quiet up until now, but spoke with a challenge in his voice.

"It's quite simple, Doctor. We can't just sail merrily off into the Pacific. *Admiral Golovko* has diesel fuel for only thirty days. So that means at some point we will have to make port—preferably in Vladivostok. We will not be able to hide these ships or slip into the Golden Horn Harbor for a quick oil change in the night. Our presence here will become known. In due course they will discover just who and what we are—the British may know this

already. Therefore, why be coy about it? We are here—most likely for the rest of our lives. But we are not just a wayward fleet lost at sea. This fleet has power."

He placed his index finger squarely on the table as he said that. "When *Kirov* returned some weeks ago it was our decision to do whatever we could to prevent the Third World War. I had little hope we could accomplish much in the year 2021. But here, now, in *this* time and place we have tremendous power."

He looked at them, a gleam in his eye. "And here is how I suggest we use it…"

Part XII

Master of Fate

“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”

— William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*

Chapter 34

The Soviet North Pacific Fleet had been very busy in recent days. Molotov had delivered the bad news to the Japanese Ambassador the previous week—the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan and would immediately launch offensive operations against Japanese held territory. One such operation was taking place in the Northern Kurile Islands where a small Soviet flotilla under Captain of the 1st Rank Dmitri Ponomarev had helped gather offensive forces from the Kamchatka Peninsula for transport to the northernmost island in the Kurile chain, Shumshu.

The landings would be risky, even if Japan was at the end of her tether in this war. They had owned and occupied the Kuriles since 1875, and their 91st Division was garrisoning the island and its small naval base commanding the northernmost Kurile Strait. The Japanese knew the ground well, and were prepared to fight, even if they did not expect the invasion that was coming. By contrast, the Soviet force dispatched to secure the island was woefully short in sea assets and particularly in sea based firepower.

The commander of the overall landings, General Gnechko, was gnashing his teeth trying to figure a way to get adequate artillery support to suppress the Japanese coastal guns and machine gun bunkers. He hit on the idea of trying to use the four 130-mm (5.1 inch) guns on the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula, but they would have to fire twelve kilometers across the strait and coordinating them accurately would be difficult. At sea he had a rag-tag collection of trawlers and patrol boats, the largest being the minesweeper *Okhotsk,* with a single 130mm gun, and a couple patrol ships, *Dzerzhinski* and *Kirov,* with three smaller 4 inch guns each.

“How am I supposed to force a landing deep enough and secure enough to get our own artillery and mortars ashore,” Gnetchko complained. “We’ll be lucky if our ships can even keep station against the fast moving currents in this strait. It’s so foggy that they’ll likely collide with one another, or run aground, if they try to move in close enough to offer any fire support. And without them we have nothing. Do you think planes can fly in this? We have no air cover, and virtually no naval assets here to speak of. If the Japanese attack the landing in force they could roll us into the sea in a few hours.”

“We’ll have good naval infantry in the first wave,” said Colonel Yeremenko. “A thousand men will land within the hour. I’ll lead them in myself. The fog may also work to our advantage, General. I think the Japanese will be completely surprised. You’ll see.”

“Yes, I suppose we will,” said Gnetchko, still somewhat disheartened. “We must get the naval base and establish a bridgehead in three hours. Either that or this will be the last Japanese victory in this damn war, and the first amphibious operation to fail against them. How will that look in the history books, eh? The Americans kick the Japanese ass across two thousand miles of the Pacific. Now we get in it at the eleventh hour and we can’t even take this stinking little island!”

The Russian troops would be going ashore in new Lend-Lease Landing Craft, transferred to the Russians by the US for just this purpose in Operation Hula a few weeks ago. Now the LCIs were loaded with infantry, their stubby bows pointed landward, the low growl of their engines muted in the cold morning fog. Yeremenko tipped his hat to the General and departed to join them.

An hour later he was ashore and leading detachments of Marines to attack the naval base site. The Japanese were taken completely by surprise, as he had hoped, and the facilities were quickly secured. Now the Marines were moving out beyond the base, up a gentle slope to move on the coastal batteries sited on higher ground.

The operation was a few days ahead of schedule, and appeared to be going well until the Japanese decided to fight. News of imminent surrender aside, they had 8500 men on the island and several companies of light tanks. The Japanese commander, Lieutenant General Tsusumi Fusaki, decided to use them. Here were a thousand Russian Marines, with more infantry lugubriously wading ashore behind them, but slow to come. The Russian advantage of surprise was slipping away as the startled Japanese realized what was happening and began to organize their defenses. True to form, Fusaki ordered an immediate counterattack.

Yeremenko heard the first sharp bark of Japanese machine guns up ahead coming from a string of bunkers linked together by a trench line. He knew he had to take it quickly by storm, or he would get bogged down here and his men would be cut to pieces. This was where the missing artillery and naval gun support would be most keenly felt. If he could just get those MG bunkers.

“Come on!” he shouted, waving his arm to lead the attack. “With a hearty “urah!” the Marines were running up the hill, like ghosts in the fog. Another group was mustered to rush the bigger Japanese naval shore batteries on Cape Kokutan. Once the fog lifted the guns would be able to pound the Russian flotilla if they were not quickly silenced. The Marines charged bravely ahead, but the machine guns were taking a heavy toll.

The detachment on the cape pressed doggedly forward, but with the shore battery finally in sight they soon saw it was also defended by a full battalion of Japanese infantry. Yeremenko got the bad news, cursing under his breath. “You there!” he yelled at a passing radio man. “Give me that!”

The Colonel cranked up the radio and dialed to his designated band to try and contact the offshore flotilla. “Land Force to *Dzerzhinski* …Land Force to *Kirov*—Where are you? Come in *Kirov*. We need your gunnery support! Land force to *Okhotsk*. Ponomarev Where are your ships? We need you!”

A corporal ran up, his eyes wide as he reported. “Comrade Colonel! They are mounting a counterattack—and they have tanks!”

“Shit!” It was all Yeremenko could say. He handed the radio off and told the radioman to keep trying to raise the naval flotilla and get some fire support. Then he grabbed a Gunnery Sergeant and two reserve squads and ran to confront the Japanese. They were coming down from the higher ground, with clusters of riflemen behind twenty light tanks.

“RPGs!” Yeremenko shouted. “Get the AT Rifles deployed!” His Marines did not yet have heavy weapons support, and there was virtually no artillery landed yet, and only a few mortars. Yet the Russians fought bravely. Teams of two and three men would deploy the old Simonov PTRS Anti-Tank Rifles and light machine guns to begin putting ranged fire on the advancing tanks. Then Marines would rush to attack with RPG-43 AT grenades. Many were shot down by the chattering machine guns but, one by one, they were getting the tanks. Fifteen of the twenty had been put out of action, some stopped only by an AT rifle hit that broke their forward tracks and rendered them unable to move. The Japanese attack was repulsed, but at a great cost.

They had been ashore four hours, but now the Japanese were beginning to open up with shore batteries, and tall geysers of seawater were seen rising through the slowly lifting fog off the harbor. Yeremenko began calling for support from the four 130mm guns across the strait, and they began to put down desultory fire in reply. Damn, he thought, what’s holding up our artillery? We’re taking heavy casualties and the enemy is already massing for

a second counterattack. Gnechko may have been correct.

They were coming. He heard the hoarse cries of Japanese infantry as they emerged from their trench line farther up the hill and began to charge. The situation was beginning to look desperate.

Then he heard the welcome sound of 130mm rounds come soaring in from behind him and took heart. He looked to see explosive rounds landing right on the enemy position, with pinpoint precision as if they had been fired from point blank range. Two, four, six, eight, the rounds came in a withering barrage that raked across the enemy trench line and struck the bunkers there. Then rounds fell right atop the Japanese shore battery, easily penetrating the concrete casemates and putting the guns out of action.

Kirov had answered the call.

* * *

It was a split decision. Karpov and the young Captain Ryakhin agreed that something should be done to further the interests of Russia after the war, and that the ships they commanded had the power to make the Americans and British take notice, and hear their demands. Doctor Zolkin had been completely opposed to the idea, urging the fleet officers to walk gently on the eggshells of history, as he put it, and the older Captain Yeltsin had enough reservations to agree with him. There were no other officers of sufficient rank in the flotilla to poll, and in the end Karpov had to exercise his authority as acting Fleet Commander to rule the day.

They lingered in the Sea of Okhotsk until Karpov had dispatched a stealthy KH-226 on a secret night mission to Vladivostok. The team of three Marines was able to get ashore unnoticed and make their way to the Naval Logistics building, even as Fedorov and Troyak had done so nearly three years earlier. The small raid would have dramatic repercussions, for after picking the lock, the letter the Marines left there would sit undisturbed for the next seventy-six years.

In a curious twist, the Marine Team leader radioed Karpov and told him that when they went to place his letter in the jacket pocket of the naval officer’s coat they found there, it was already occupied by another note!

Karpov had a sudden realization, and a stab of emotion when he heard that. Fedorov, he thought. It had to be Fedorov’s note! The image of the industrious young officer he had once disdained and then came to like and respect so much brought a smile to his face. Then his features clouded over,

and he dismissed the Marine with a well done and carry on.

In a strange twist on these events, when Volkov had leapt from the shadows just days earlier in 2021, he had seen only the note from Fedorov. Volkov could not have seen Karpov's letter there before the Captain would ever have reason to dispatch it. Yet the instant *Kirov* and the other two ships were again swept through the centuries by the explosive Demon Volcano, all history had changed again, ever so subtly, but decisively. Both letters should have been there when Volkov opened that locker, but Time decided to deliver the mail on different days. It was, in fact, an alternate time line now, and Karpov had his hand on the tiller at a most decisive moment.

The Captain was steering east again, staring at the broken, cratered cone of the Demon Volcano on the northern tip of the Iturup/Urup Island group to his south and experiencing a strange moment that seemed like *Déjà vu.*

Nikolin had been monitoring radio traffic and reported something odd that morning. "It keeps fading in and out, sir. Very strange."

"And you say it's calling us?"

"Yes, sir—*Kirov*. I can read that very plainly. *Kirov,* where are you?"

"Well have you checked with *Orlan* and *Golovko?"*

"Yes sir. Neither ship has radioed. They're maintaining radio silence as ordered."

Karpov thought about that for a moment, and then went over to the plotting table where he had Fedorov's book to check on something. Minutes later he was smiling. "Good ears, Mister Nikolin, but don't worry about it. The Soviets are running an operation just north of us. There's a border patrol ship named *Kirov* with a few old minesweepers and trawlers to occupy Sakhalin Island and the northern Kuriles. Have you heard the name Ponomarev?"

"Yes sir," said Nikolin. "I did hear that name."

"He was in charge of the Petropavlovsk Naval Defense Sector here in 1945, at least according to Fedorov's book. He commanded the naval flotilla."

"How ironic," said Rodenko. "*Kirov* meets *Kirov* in the Kuriles."

"Karpov grinned at him. Then consulted his book. "It looks like the Russians ran into more than they expected in this operation. They're going to lose over 1500 men in this little invasion. That's expensive for a useless hunk of rock." He turned his head to one side and looked at Rodenko.

"Mister Rodenko. Tell the KA-226 to get over and scan that northernmost

island. Have them feed radar returns to Samsonov. Use Infrared as well. I want them to pinpoint the main Japanese defense line."

"You're thinking of rendering assistance?"

"If we can't help our boys out there then what's it all for?" said Karpov. "Why do you think we have on these uniforms?"

Within the hour the KA-226 had reported back with a stream of digital data for Samsonov's CIC station. The Captain ordered him to activate *Kirov's* 130mm deck guns, three twin batteries that could fire at enormous range with pinpoint accuracy. He looked at his watch—a little after 9:00 hrs.

"Let's lend our Marines a hand, Samsonov. Open fire!"

It didn't take long. *Kirov's* guns were right on target, taking out numerous bunkers and disabling the enemy shore batteries at a critical moment. The barrage also broke the back of the second Japanese counterattack, buying the Russians much needed time to land more supplies and infantry. Soon Colonel Yeremenko would have his artillery and mortars ashore, and the situation would reach parity, then slowly tip his way. The war would be over in the next 24 hours.

Karpov turned to Rodenko. "Well we need not worry about our northern flank any longer. We'll steer for the lower channels and get out into the Pacific. What do we have down south, Rodenko?" Karpov knew what he was going to say even before he spoke. "You're going to tell me you have contacts on a large naval task force there. Yes?" the Captain said matter of factly.

"Why…Yes sir. It just came up on the Fregat system as surface returns. The KA- 226 picked it up earlier."

The Captain went to Rodenko's station, looking over his shoulder, smiling when he saw the clear blips indicating unknown surface contacts to the south.

"They're about 150 miles off the Island of Honshu, due east of Amori / Misawa. Note those secondary returns there, sir. Those are aircraft. This must be a carrier task force."

"How very interesting," said Karpov. "Seventy six years from now our ship was facing Captain Tanner and his carrier battlegroup in almost this exact same location. Now here we face the same situation, only things are different this time. We appeared to be overmatched by the American Navy in 2021, yet I dealt with them easily enough. Now we are but three ships, and look at the number of radar returns there! It seems we are outnumbered again.

Yet appearances can be deceiving," he smiled.

"What are we going to do, sir? Those ships are definitely heading our way."

"They'll most likely have air reconnaissance up shortly. Probably wondering what happened to that damn submarine, and those impudent little destroyers that wanted to order us off." He turned to his communications officer. "Mister Nikolin, get Yeltsin on the *Orlan* on the radio for me, and notify Captain Ryakhin on *Admiral Golovko* that he is to assume Air Alert Two and stand by."

"Aye, sir," signaling as ordered.

Yeltsin was on the line a few moments later and Karpov picked up the handset. "Good morning, Captain. I trust your radar officer has already reported on the contacts to the south."

"A sizable fleet," said Yeltsin. *"We read twenty-four discrete surface contacts. And what were you shooting at to the north a while back?"*

"Just clearing our throat, Captain. We'll be doing a little talking soon. I'm sending up our KA-226 with long range cameras to get some footage of that task force to the south. I'll have it fed directly to your ship as well. Take a good long look when you see it, and don't think those ships are a welcoming committee. They'll be coming for *us*, Yeltsin. Understand? They think they've won this war single handedly and now they own it all. The arrogance, the insults, the duplicity—all the crap that Captain Tanner handed me has its root and stem right here. It will grow like a bad weed, and nothing will change for the next seventy-five years unless we make it so."

Karpov was aiming to convince Yeltsin that his decision to intervene was a correct one. If he went into battle here, he wanted to make certain that his officers were all behind him, and Yeltzin had wavered with Zolkin's soft line. He had to tighten things down before the situation began to escalate, as he knew it surely would.

"Very well." Yeltsin's voice came back. *"But think this through carefully, Karpov."*

"Count on that, Captain. Just as I'll be counting on your support as well. You will soon see with your own eyes what I've been talking about. Those ships will most likely attack us before day's end. In that event, I hope I can count on both you and your ship to do your duty. You may not want this little war, but you are a *man* of war. If our actions here can prevent a holocaust in the future, I say so be it. Whether I take action or not, it looks like things are

going to start to change in short order. But this time we'll be calling the shots —not the Americans."

There was a long pause, and Karpov listened through the static, his eyes moving this way and that as if he sought to see the other man's face in the wash of noise.

"Don't worry Captain. We'll do what we must."

The question of what they should do was behind them now. Zolkin's voice was not strong enough in the argument to really matter. Now it was a question of what they must do.

And it was about to begin.

Chapter 35

BB Missouri – CnC Flag, U.S. 3rd Fleet
120 Miles East of Honshu Island, Japan

“Say LTC…This might not mean anything, but we haven’t heard from *Razorback* for three days now, and TF.92 is also late reporting in. What’s up with the Browns?”

Lt. Commander Bob Harper leaned over his desk, inclining his head to the Ensign on his right, Tim Gates. “The Browns?”

“Yes, sir,” said Gates with a smile. “That’s LTC Brown on *Razorback* up in the Kuriles, and then there’s Rear *Admiral* Brown up there with TF.92. They related?”

Harper frowned. “Who knows if they’re related, Gates. What’s your problem?”

“Well they haven’t reported in, sir, and the Russians just declared war on Japan a few days ago. You figure they mixed it up with the Russkies up north?”

“The Russians are our *allies*, Gates. Get that through your thick skull. Besides, this war declaration of theirs was just theater. It’s a land grab before we finish this thing up, that’ s all.”

“Well they haven’t reported in, sir—the Browns.”

“Then get on the goddamned radio and find out about it. They probably just ran into some bad weather up there. Don’t worry about security protocols anymore, Gates, Japan is finished. We’re just picking over the carcass for table scraps now. Word is they’ll surrender any time now, if they haven’t already done so. Get down to the radio room and see about it.”

Japan was indeed finished. The relentless advance of the United States Navy had pushed them from one island to the next, an unstoppable juggernaut displaying more sheer naval power than the world had ever seen before or since. Now that Okinawa had been taken, American carrier task forces ranged freely throughout the waters surrounding the Japanese home islands mounting raids on harbors, rail yards, and offshore shipping as they prodded the fallen beast to accede to their terms and surrender. Word was that the distinguished and long serving Admiral Yamamoto himself was now

attempting to persuade the Emperor that it was futile to continue resistance.

As part of the ongoing effort to isolate the islands and sweep the seas around them clean, American submarines were patrolling at many locations, including off the Kuriles in cooperation with US TF.92 under rear Admiral John "Babe" Brown, comprising the cruisers *Richmond* and *Concord*, with twelve destroyers. They had been shelling Japanese installations in the Kuriles for the last several days, bombarding Matsuwa Island, Kurabu Cape and Suribachi Bay. The destroyers had swept the Sea of Okhotsk and rounded up ten small Japanese trawlers that had been ferrying supplies out to the small garrisons on the islands.

When Gates set off to find out about the operations he drew a blank. He went down to the radio room and had messages sent using normal channels, but nothing came back. Just when he was ready to forget about the whole thing, an SOS came in. Brown's TF.92 ran into something alright, but was it wasn't bad weather. With the message in hand he ran back to his post, eager for his 'I told ya so' with the Lieutenant Commander."

"See here," he handed the message over to Harper, eyebrows raised. "Japs must still be putting up a fight!"

Harper took the report, reading it aloud quietly. "*TF.92 reports surface action twelve miles North-Northeast of Kunashir Island – STOP – Cruiser Richmond heavily damaged. – STOP – Two destroyers sunk and men in the water- STOP – This is an S.O.S…"*

Harper looked at Gates, clearly bemused. "Son-of-a-bitch, Gates. Looks like you were on to something. Anything on that sub?"

"Razorback? No, sir. She still hasn't reported in."

"Well this is news. *Richmond* and *Concord* are a pair of old rust-buckets. They're both *Omaha* class light cruisers, commissioned in the 1920s. That said, what could the Japs have up there that would bother them?"

"Could be those damn Kamikaze attacks again, sir."

"Possibly… Word is they're still going after our ships when they can find them. That's why Halsey gave the order today. He told the Squadron Flight leaders to shoot down any snoopers approaching fleet units—not vindictively, but in a friendly sort of way. Gotta love that man."

In her last desperate death throes the Japanese had tried everything to stop the American advance, even resorting to strange new piloted rocket planes that were deliberately aimed at US shipping. In spite of the imminent surrender order, at that very moment, the last of the Japanese Kamikaze pilots

were taking off from airfields near Tokyo, and among them was the Commander of the decimated Japanese 5th Air Fleet, Vice Admiral Matome Ugaki. He could not abide the talk of surrender, even coming from Admiral Yamamoto, for whom he once served as Chief Of Staff.

In another writing of that history, Ukagi would have been flying, in a separate plane, escorting Admiral Yamamoto when they were both ambushed and shot down on 18 April 1943 over Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. Yamato perished, Ugaki survived, yet not this time around. *Kirov* had so altered the history that their personal fates remained entwined, and Yamamoto lived out the war. Ukagi had been mustering the last of Japan's dwindling air power to mount a massive attack with hundreds of aircraft on suicide missions in the defense of Kyushu. It was to be called "Operation Ketsu-Go," the "decisive moment," but when Yamamoto heard of it he issued orders to forbid what he called the senseless waste of yet more lives. After the venerable Admiral advocated surrender instead, Ugaki was so disheartened that he joined the last Kamikaze strike sortied from Japanese soil in the war. It was said he died holding a ceremonial short sword given to him by Admiral Yamamoto.

The incident clearly illustrated the desperately conflicted nation as they faced the prospect of final humiliation and defeat. Some men obeyed the Emperor's order to cease hostilities when it came, and others did not, preferring death to dishonor in accordance with the Japanese code of Bushido.

To persuade the Japanese, the Americans had secretly moved two atomic bombs to Tinian, and were fully prepared to use them in spite of what they had endured in the North Atlantic at the hands of a similar weapon—an incident the American public, and few in the military, ever knew of. The announcement of surrender prevented that horror.

"Well if the goddamned holy highness just announced the surrender of Japan," said Gates, "then why are they still fighting? What gives, LTC?"

"Somebody didn't get the message, that's what gives. There's a big air duel going on right now over Tokyo, because some of our boys didn't get the order to stand down until they were already engaged."

"Well aren't we going to do something about this, sir? I mean, we can't let the Japs keep taking pot shots at our ships and subs, can we?"

"They'll do something about it, Gates, but that's well above your pay grade. You just get over to that desk there and sort through the rest of those

intercepts. I want everything filed in two hours. Got that?"

Several stars above Gates on the pay grade chart, other men were considering the same situation that morning, and they didn't like what they found out. They got word from Babe Brown's TF.92 and started listening in on his radio traffic. It didn't sound good, and while doing so they also heard radio traffic signaling to a vessel named *Kirov*. It came in and out, repeated, faded, returned.

The incident with Brown's task force had suddenly turned the watchful eye of US Naval Intelligence north to the lonesome and mostly deserted islands of the Kurile archipelago. A relief force was immediately dispatched to render assistance to TF.92, and inquiries were discreetly made to the Russian Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok, where it was learned that they had a pair of patrol ships off the northern Kurile islands for a security operation, one of which was named *Kirov*.

It was a sublime coincidence, and it would have ramifications no one could foresee at that moment. The US informed the Russian Pacific Fleet Commander of the incident involving TF.92 and told them American fleet units would be investigating. Vladivostok said they knew nothing about the incident. Halsey wasn't going to fool around any longer. If the Russians wanted to get pushy, he'd show them what they were up against. He was on the radio discussing it with Nimitz who was at fleet headquarters on Guam.

"This couldn't be a Japanese ship," he said. "We've accounted for most every major combatant they have."

"Well it was enough to give Babe Brown one hell of a bloody nose," Nimitz came back. *"What did we miss, Bull? What's the report say?"*

"Three ships, Admiral. One reported as a heavy cruiser or bigger. Brown says they might have been a Russians."

"Russians?" The surprise was evident in Nimitz voice. *"MacArthur has been all up in a tizzy fit over Russian intentions up there. He thinks they're planning to occupy Hokkaido."*

"They don't have the naval forces for that," Halsey said quickly. "Word is they were barely able to support a landing in the Northern Kuriles. They try anything on Hokkaido and the Japanese will fight."

"Yes, and if they fight there then this cease fire and surrender agreement could go right down the tubes. That's why we need to put the fear of the Lord into the Russians, Bull. Who do we have up there who could send them a message?"

“I have just the man we need,” said Halsey. “My old flight instructor.”

Task Group 38.3 had been operating in the Tokyo area, and was steaming about 150 miles off the eastern coast of Honshu on August 15, 1945. It was a fast carrier task force under distinguished fighting officer, Rear Admiral Clifton Sprague. Nicknamed “Ziggy” at the naval academy because of his wildly animated gait, Sprague had come up through the ranks from posts on lowly oilers and cargo vessels and also helped pioneer naval aviation, where he trained Admiral, Bull Halsey himself. He served on *Lexington* and *Yorktown* before the war, and eventually achieved command of the newly constructed carrier *Wasp*, CV-18. He fought with her at Saipan and the Philippine Sea, reaching the rank of Rear Admiral at the young age of 48 years. In October of the previous year his task force of escort carriers dubbed “Taffy 3” had fought off the main Japanese Center Force at the Battle off Samar Island.

One of the largest engagements in naval history, Sprague’s gallant destroyers and “jeep carriers” confronted a powerful Japanese naval force under Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita including six heavy cruisers and four battleships, one of which was the venerable *Yamato*. That ship had not participated in a naval engagement in anger since she tangled with a mysterious raider off the southern tip of Papua New Guinea three years earlier, but she lived to fight this one last time before joining her sister ship *Musashi* at the bottom of the sea.

So as big as the Pacific Ocean was, the lines of fate crossed and tangled with one another, and the battlecruiser *Kirov* was somehow at the heart of it all. Two men would soon meet on the high seas, and both had faced and fought *Yamato* in the only two engagements that battleship fought during the war.

It was Sprague’s gallantry in the battle off Samar that earned him the Navy Cross, and installed him as one of the US Navy’s true fighting Admirals. He would go on to see action at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and then take command of the fast Carrier Division 2 with his flag set on VC-14, the *Ticonderoga*. That ship, along with the carriers *Wasp*, *Monterey*, and *Bataan*, formed the heart of TG.38.3, which had just finished pounding Hokkaido as the war ended. With news of unfinished business up north and the Russians on maneuver, Halsey ordered Sprague to “get up there and have a look around.”

The fighting Admiral was eager to oblige. He steered his carrier group

north with the battleships *South Dakota*, *North Carolina*, four cruisers and sixteen destroyers in escort, and a couple of radar pickets out in front, the *Benner* and *Southerland*. It seemed overkill in many ways. Third Fleet Commander Halsey knew that Japan was beaten and had already surrendered. Yet being a little edgy over Soviet intentions for Northern Japan, the relief force he would sent north would be substantial this time.

"I'll send Ziggy Sprague," said Halsey. "He'll get the job done, and then some."

Nimitz agreed with Halsey that a brief show of force up north would discourage Russian ambitions in the region easily enough. After all, what could a small Russian force in the Kuriles led by a patrol boat named *Kirov* do in the face of such overwhelming American naval power? He would show the Soviets what a real navy looked like, and Sprague was just the man for the job.

Yet Halsey had not reckoned on the presence of another ship named *Kirov* that day, nor on the ambitions of one Russian officer commanding a small flotilla of three ships cruising in the Sea of Okhotsk.

* * *

They had called it the "Month of Fire," when the carriers swarmed around the Japanese home islands and relentlessly dismantled the last of Japan's war fighting capacity for air/sea operations. At long last it was over, though a few cinders were still burning hot, or so it seemed.

Admiral Fraser, Commander of the Royal Navy Pacific Fleet, got word of an incident late on the 15th of August, 1945, and something in the reports raised his hackles. He was a recent arrival, setting his flag on *Duke of York* on August 6th and taking her up to join the British TF.37 that was one of four allied fast carrier task forces operating off Honshu and Hokkaido late in the war. TF.37 had recently cooperated with the Americans in those raids, including Sprague's group. It was now in the Sea of Japan and preparing to send a good number of its ships back to the British base at Manus Island due to fuel shortages in the British replenishment tankers, but something in these reports gave Fraser pause, and he countermanded those orders.

"Are you sure?" he asked his warrant officer looking over the message. "They used the word rockets?"

"Plain as day, sir. Shouted it out just before they went down. We just got

word a few minutes ago in this wire."

Fraser's eyes had a distant look in them now. "Very well. Signal Captain Schofield on King George V and tell him I'd like his ship to remain on station. The same for all carrier commanders. That will be all."

"Sir." The messenger saluted and started back for the telegraph room, stopping quickly when the Admiral called after him. "One more thing. Send to the Yanks Admiral Halsey," he said. "Tell him I'd like to have a chat with him again as soon as possible…And make sure it's well coded."

"At once, sir."

Fraser watched the man go, getting up from his desk in the Flag Command Room aboard the battleship *Duke of York.* He walked slowly to the window, staring out to sea to watch the other ships in his task force riding smartly in formation.

Nimitz and Halsey will think I'm keen to make arrangements to attend the surrender ceremony planned for next week, he thought. But there was something about this incident report that struck a nerve. More information was filtering in on the wires. Apparently a small American task force under Admiral Brown had a scrap with a hostile force up in the Kuriles and lost ships and men there. That alone was surprising enough, given the fact that the allied navies had pounded virtually every Japanese ship known to oblivion. Now details of that engagement were starting to touch on a black memory.

Rockets… The American Admiral Brown had finally filed his report and claimed his ships were hit by fast moving rockets. Fraser knew the Japanese had been experimenting with a rocket assisted suicide glider, and every other navy was also toying with one prototype or another. The Germans certainly had a number of rocket weapons, and the Royal Navy was also using rocket powered munitions against U-boats. Similar weapons had blasted the invasion beaches from Sicily to Normandy. Late in the war Britain also deployed a new weapon they called the 'Stooge,' a radio-guided missile with a range of about nine miles. It reached a top speed of 500 mph and carried a 220lb warhead to attack incoming Japanese Kamikaze flights. He still had several of the weapons here with his carriers, and the Americans had something even more advanced called the "Bat." The British had learned many hard lessons, the legacy of harrowing experience from earlier in the war that was still highly classified.

Rockets guided by radar…What was the world coming to, thought Fraser? If he hadn't seen the damn things himself flashing in on *Rodney* and

Nelson that night in the Mediterranean he would find it all too much to believe. Now he saw something darker in this report than appeared on the surface. The American Admiral Brown's scouting force on patrol in the Kuriles had run into trouble and several of his ships were hit and sunk. The word 'rockets' was on their lips when they died.

Not again, he thought. Not now, when we've finally won this thing and are ready to put this insanity to rest. He had the quiet distinction of being the last carrier force in the Pacific to fly combat sorties when *Seafires* off the *Implacable* shot down 8 Japanese planes on August 15. But what if his darkest misgivings were true? Now they were saying the hostile ships in this latest incident had been reported as Russian! That little piece of the puzzle completed a picture for him that the Americans might not yet see. The British had shared some of what they learned with the Americans after that first disastrous engagement in the North Atlantic, but they didn't know everything. They didn't know about Tovey's little chat with this rogue Admiral, or anything of what happened off St. Helena soon after. And they didn't know about the Watch just yet, though they would have to be brought in on the matter soon.

The damn ship keeps coming back, he thought. It found us in the Med in '42 and then gave us the slip and wound up in the Pacific! That was, in part, why he had been given the assignment here, for he was one of the very few in the Royal Navy who was now fully briefed on 'the ship,' as it was simply called. The code word to be used upon confirmation of an actual sighting of this mysterious vessel was something else, and he hoped he would never have to hear it again—Geronimo.

Now he looked out the side port and saw the fast carriers riding the waves: *Indefatigable*, *Formidable*, *Implacable*, and a ship all too familiar with the Geronimo raider, *Victorious*. Just off his port side another proud veteran of those engagements steamed close by, *King George V*. Tovey had her in the thick of it on more than one occasion. It's a pity, he thought quietly. Old *Rodney* and *Nelson* were too damn slow that night and the monster slipped west to Gibraltar. But then Tovey had four new battleships at hand in the Western Approaches, surely enough raw steel and firepower to settle the matter once and for all, and instead he decided to parley with the Admiral of this strange nemesis.

And the man was Russian… The ship and crew were Russian! Russians and rockets at sea…rockets shooting down aircraft. He could feel it, sense it,

a growing sense of presentiment and dire warning setting off a thrum of anxiety in his chest. Could it be happening again?

Here I thought it was all over but the pomp and circumstance. I was out here to invest Fleet Admiral Nimitz with the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, and award Halsey the Order of the Knight of the British Empire. Always proper to express our appreciation to the Yanks after all they've done for the Crown. Then it was on to the surrender ceremony—now this.

Another look at his carriers gave him heart. Beyond the four fleet carriers and two battleships here, he also had six cruisers and sixteen destroyers with him in TF.37, and this was only one of several similarly sized formations in the region. The Americans had four such task forces at sea now, all eager to gather at Sagami Bay near Tokyo next week and put an end to this madness.

Put an end to it all….

Well, he thought. If the worst comes about, and this is another 'incident,' we bloody well have the ships and planes to do exactly that. If this damn ship appears again we'll make scrap metal of it soon enough.

Then he remembered what Admiral Tovey had told him about that first engagement in late 1941, and what had really sent the American battleship *Mississippi* to the bottom of the sea—an atomic bomb. A flicker of doubt crossed his eyes, then resolve renewed there like hidden fire.

I'd better get over and see Halsey again as soon as possible, he thought. Forewarned is forearmed. The Yanks had a good fighting Admiral going up to have a look at this business and confirm these reports. Sprague was as good as they came, but he was not in the inner circle—he didn't know about the rockets, let alone the atomics. Fraser realized that things would be quite different now if it came down to a real fight. We've got the damn things too, he thought, and I've seen enough of this war to know one thing if it comes down to real trouble here—we'll use them.

Chapter 36

Ticonderoga was a very tough ship. An *Essex* class carrier, she was commissioned in May of 1944, and would see a brief but violent tour of duty in the Pacific before the war ended. The ship fought bravely in the Philippines Campaign, fending off kamikaze attacks on the fleet, launching fighter sweeps over Luzon and pounding enemy positions wherever they were found. She also rode out two punishing typhoons before fighting her way into the South China Sea where her task force sunk an amazing enemy 44 ships. On the 21st of January she was struck by two bomb laden kamikaze planes, just as Hayashi had struck *Kirov*, and was forced to limp home to Puget Sound for repairs. But by May she was back in the Pacific and running with the fast fleet carriers that had broken the back of the Japanese navy and inexorably rolled towards the Japanese homelands with unstoppable power.

Airmen off the *Ticonderoga* had found and sunk the last remnants of the once proud Japanese navy, sending battleships *Ise, Hyuga* and *Haruna* to watery graves along with the escort carrier *Kaiyo* as the United States systematically destroyed what was left of Japanese air and sea power. TF.38.3 had worked its way up Kyushu to pound Hokkaido by mid August, destroying a massed air division that was marshalling to plan a major suicide raid on the US B-29 bases in the Marianas. The ship had planes in the air over Tokyo when the word came in that Japan had finally capitulated. At the same time CV *Wasp's* alert combat air patrol stopped a pair of Japanese planes from attacking the task force. The last sputtering embers of the war were still hot, but that evening the flyers celebrated in the air briefing room with several bottles of champagne that Ziggy Sprague had produced from his haversacks.

Then news came of the attack on Babe Brown's cruisers and the loss of two destroyers in the Kuriles. Halsey was quick to tag his fighting Admiral to go and have a look, and Sprague was on the bridge that day, his eyes gazing at the sea.

While still a young man, his features were lined and weathered by the long war, and looking much older than his 49 years. And Ex-navy airman who trained in the days before the seat harness was installed, he had been thrown into more windshields and instrument panels than he could count over

the years. Now he had the nose of a fighter that had seen one or two more rounds than he needed, and hound dog eyes that seemed to hold a cup of yearning in them. He wore a Navy garrison cap, eschewing the billed officer's cap as he found it more comfortable and easier to use with field glasses, particularly in combat.

When it came to fighting at sea Sprague was tough as nails, cool under fire and determined. His actions off Samar with the escort carriers and destroyers of Taffy 3 won him long lasting fame, but also haunted him with the memory of the ships and men lost that day. 1130 men went into the sea and died off Samar, many taken by the sharks. Another 913 were wounded and bore the scars of that action. The rest lived with the memory of it all, as Sprague did. Now he was about to be put to the test yet again.

Sprague had a couple of DD pickets well out in front, just under a hundred kilometers ahead of his main force. They were a pair of *Gearing* class destroyers outfitted with radar to form an advanced screen. Each one had been specially modified for their new role by removing one of the torpedo tube mounts and altering the internal arrangement to make space for SP radar, IFF, and rudimentary ECM equipment.

Both ships were newcomers to the action in the Pacific, laid down in 1944, with *Southerland* commissioned in December of that year and *Benner* joining the fleet in February of 1945. Their SP system was a light weight fighter direction control radar on a parabolic antenna that rotated six times per minute. With a range of 30 to 65 kilometers for surface contacts, depending on their size, and 65 to 130 kilometers for air contacts, they were nearly in range of *Kirov* and the small Russian flotilla to the north. They had been sent to look for any sign of trouble that morning, cruising due east of Nemuro Peninsula on Hokkaido, though all seemed quiet and calm.

Commander John Mulholland was aboard *Benner* when his radar operators called out contacts to the north, emerging from the long chain of the Kurile Islands. He leaned over the operator's scope, watching the slow sweep of the radar circling every ten seconds.

"Looks to be three ships, sir. They're right between those two big Islands. I'll send the position to the plotting board."

"Very well," said Mulholland, wondering what he was seeing here. He knew the US now had nothing in that area after Admiral Brown had withdrawn his task force. The reports circulating on Brown's encounter were dim at best. Two destroyers went down, hit by something they figured to be a

rocket powered glider the Japanese would called the *Okha*, or *Cherry Blossom.* It was a suicide rocket, piloted and dropped from bombers at altitude before its solid fuel rocket engine would send it on to the target. But the odd thing was that there had been no reports of any air contacts before that attack, and the approach came in from the north, well out in the Sea of Okhotsk. Mulholland could not imagine that the Japanese had anything left afloat up here, and so the sudden attack on Babe Brown's light cruisers was a bit of a mystery.

Three ships… He got on the radio at once to inform the Task Force flag and was told to continue tracking the contacts until the fleet could send up a flight of *Hellcats* to have a closer look. He decided to radio Commander Williams on *Sutherland* as well, and pass on their marching orders.

A half hour later they could detect the *Hellcats* coming up from the main body, a tight fist of five fighters designated Redeye One passing overhead about 50 kilometers south of the contacts they were to investigate. Mulholland watched the planes disappear, taking over point duty on this long range recon operation, and he waited on the open channel for a report. He did not like what he heard next.

"Redeye one to Bullfrog, we have the contacts in visual range. Confirm three ships, and one is a big fellow. Over"

"Roger Redeye, get down and have a closer look. Bullfrog Over."

Mulholland was on the radio himself, a personal habit. He wanted to hear what was reported directly, not through a watchstander, and if he said anything in return he wanted the other fellow to get it right from the horse's mouth where there was no chance of misinterpretation. He listened to the flight leader chatting with his mates.

"Fan out and get down on the deck boys. Let's go make some noise." The planes were going in low and fast. If they could ID a rising sun on any flag those ships were flying they had authorization to open up in a strafing run. The war might be officially over, but any Japanese warship still found to be at sea was still fair game.

* * *

"Those planes are getting close," said Rodenko, an edge of warning in his voice.

"I'm hearing them on radio, sir," said Nikolin. "Something about frogs

with red eyes."

"Frogs with red eyes?" Karpov grinned at him. "Your translation skills are slipping, Mister Nikolin."

"I have it now, sir. Redeye…that must be their designation for the incoming aircraft. The frogs are the two ships."

"That's makes a little more sense."

"They're dropping down below 5000 meters," said Rodenko. "It's most likely a reconnaissance run."

"Most likely," said Karpov, but the ship was on Air Alert One nonetheless, and Samsonov had both the medium range *Klinok* and also his *Kashtan* close in Missile defense systems ready as ordered. The Captain had instructed the other two ships in his flotilla to stand ready, but to hold their fire and allow the flagship to handle the matter.

The previous day his ships had been approached by three American contacts. Tasarov reported a submarine creeping into a position ahead of his flotilla and considered what to do. The sub decided the matter when it launched two torpedoes, both well wide of the mark after Karpov quickly ordered a sharp fleet maneuver to starboard. *Kirov* killed the sub quickly with a torpedo from a KH-40 helo sent up on ASW picket. With his phobia about submarines still a demon on his shoulder, Karpov wanted no potentially hostile undersea boats anywhere near the ship from that moment forward. *Razorback* never called home after that.

Then two destroyers must have picked up on the engagement and rushed to the scene, making it obvious they intended to attack, They too were sent to the bottom by a pair of Moskit-IIs. They were followed by two cruiser class ships approaching at high speed, and Karpov had considered what he might do next. He wanted to de-escalate the situation, but the cruisers decided to press the matter and started dropping salvos off his starboard quarter. He answered with four P-900s.

He would say that the Americans were the first to fire, but everyone on the bridge could sense that the Captain had no real qualms about what had happened. Karpov seemed different now, not the man he had become in those long weeks of close cooperation with Fedorov and Volsky. Both had been counterweights to his darker ambitions, and neither man was on the ship now. Only Zolkin remained, but he had been voted down. Somewhere in the Captain's mind that cold logic was again asserting itself—they could never get home now, not without Rod-25. If that were the case, then this was their

world, and Karpov intended to be one of the big fish in the sea he cruised on now—the *biggest* fish in the sea.

As he watched the American planes approach he was well aware of the danger they posed yet wondered if they were making an attack run here. The memory of those tense moments aboard *Kirov* after they had first appeared in late July of 1941 was still clear in his mind. He recalled how Admiral Volsky had calmly waited out the approach of that first aircraft, unwilling to fire, and now he thought to do the same. One of the cruisers he hit the previous day had sunk, and there was still a place in his mind, in his conscience, that gnawed at him. He had already put three ships and a submarine on the bottom of the sea, clearly a provocation deserving a strong response by the Americans. But how would they know his ships were responsible? The Americans would be looking for remnants of the Japanese fleet. They would be cautious at first, or so he reasoned.

Another side of his mind argued that if he wanted to take his little fleet down to Tokyo Bay and negotiate, a demonstration of his strength was necessary first. Babe Brown had stuck his nose in the matter at just the wrong time, and he paid for it. But Karpov did not expect that the Americans would be so quick to marshal a major naval force and send it north like this.

"Those planes are getting close," said Rodenko again. "It will have to be the *Kashtan* system if we need to engage now, sir."

"Steady, gentlemen," said Karpov. "If they wanted to attack they would not send only five planes."

They could hear the sound of the aircraft now, and Karpov had his field glasses up, preferring them to the Tin Man optical HD camera feeds. The planes came in very low, their engines roaring. All eyes were on the Captain, with obvious anxiety as the noise grew ever louder.

"Steady…" The *Hellcats* were over them in a flash, their big radial engines growling as they overflew the flotilla. But they did not fire.

Karpov smiled, picking up the handset and calling Yeltsin on the *Orlan*. "Well, Captain, he said. I hope you had a good look at those planes. Our history expert is not with us at the moment but those were American World War Two era fighter planes, and the contacts to our south will be a fast carrier task force. If you had any lingering doubts as to our situation, this should dispel them."

Yeltsin was convinced, but there was also an edge of worry in his voice. *"I'm not sure I'd let them overfly us again like that, Captain."*

“I’ll handle the matter. Karpov out.”

“They are circling for another pass,” said Rodenko. “They probably want camera footage.”

“Mister Nikolin?” Karpov wanted to know if he could determine what the pilots were saying.

“They seem surprised, sir. Something about a battlewagon… …where are the guns… something about the Russians. One says our ship is too big to be Russian.”

The planes came round again. Then it happened—one of those quirks of fate, a mischance born of emotion and happenstance. A young man aboard the *Admiral Golovko* was at his air defense action station, and he was manning the manual sighting interface behind a 30mm Gatling gun, a backup precaution in case the ship lost computer control of the weapon. The system was not engaged. He saw no sign that the guns were responding to targeting radars to track the incoming planes, so he naturally assumed the weapon was inactive. He decided to track the approach of the planes himself, just as he had practiced this emergency drill before. It was, in fact, only the third time he had ever drilled at a battle station, which made him as raw as they came. On all of those occasions the rounds were never engaged in the gun firing chambers. So he would practice squeezing off short imaginary bursts at the target drones while other gunners were firing their live exercises on nearby ships.

All he had ever aimed at before were a few floating buoys on the water. This time things were much more exciting. As the *Hellcats* came in a second time he had his eye on the leftmost plane in the formation, following its approach by centering it in the range finder and the squeezing a trigger he thought was inactive.

It was live.

The AK-630M dual Gatling system suddenly erupted with a snarl of red orange fire and it blew the wing right off the plane he was tracking, sending it cartwheeling into the sea.

* * *

“Holy God! They just took down Billy!”

“Son-of-a-*bitch*. Climb! Get up to angels ten and come three-sixty around the right side.” It was Lieutenant Tom Haley, flight leader, and he was

hopping mad. “Anybody get a good look at that bastard?”

“Blue X on a white standard,” came an answer. *“That’s not Japanese, is it LT?”*

“Not since I last looked, and that was just a few days ago. It sure as hell’s not ours either. So that narrows down the list. Has to be Russian, just like we called it on the first pass. Either that or the Japs are trying to pull a fast one on us by reflagging their ships.”

“Russians? What the hell are they shooting at us for?”

“Hell-if-I-know. But we’re sure as hell going to return the favor.”

“Damn right, sir!”

Billy Watts had been Haley’s sidekick and wing mate for the last six months, and the thought of him in the drink, bushwhacked on a photo run, was more than he could pass on. He pulled hard and banked right, anger in his eyes.

“Let’s give ‘em a taste of our Brownings. One pass. Then break for home.”

“Roger that Comet,” came a reply. Haley’s nickname was an obvious one. *“This one’s for Billy.”*

* * *

“Who fired on those planes?” Karpov was red faced with anger when he saw the American plane go down.”

“It looked like *Golovko*, sir,” said Rodenko. “AK-630 system.”

“Nikolin! Raise *Golovko* and get me that young Captain. I’ll stew him for this.” But before Nikolin could raise the other ship, it was clear the planes were coming round again. Karpov turned, snapping his field glasses up to get a better look.

“Don’t do it,” he breathed.

“I don’t think they’ll be taking photos this time,” said Rodenko, and the Captain knew he was correct.

“Damn!” said Karpov, but he knew he had to act. “*Kashtan* System. *Now* Samsonov—before they get in range.” He would not allow four planes to rake his ships with machinegun fire.

“Sir, aye *Sir!”* And the missiles fired, fast little air sharks with white tails as they streaked into the sky. They adjusted to lock on, and then accelerated towards the *Hellcats*.

Samsonov fired four missiles.

He killed four planes.

* * *

Commander Mulholland had been listening to the whole affair, his eyes darkening as he heard the sharp burst of static, the frantic call of a *Hellcat* pilot calling *"Rockets! Rockets!"* and then nothing more. He toggled his send button.

"Bulldog to Redeye. Report status, Over… "Bulldog to Redeye. Report status, Over…."

Nothing came back.

Mulholland scratched the back of his neck, the place where it always itched when there was trouble at hand. He was out there to look for it, and damn if he didn't find some. "Some son-of-a-bitch just didn't get the message that this damn war is supposed to be over." It was clear that those contacts had opened up on the recon flight, and he dialed a new comm channel and radioed back to the Flag.

"Bullfrog One to Flag. Our contact is hostile—repeat—contact hostile. Splash Redeye One."

There was a long pause, as if the news he had radioed had been most unwelcome, or difficult to comprehend. *"Say again Bullfrog—You say Splash Redeye One? Did we lose somebody? Over."*

Mulholland thumbed his send. "We lost them *all*—repeat—splash all units. We have no radio contact and nothing on radar. Redeye One is history. Over."

Again the long pause…interminably long it seemed. Then another voice came over the speaker and Mulholland had heard it before, many times, low and slow, calm and steady. But this time there was just a touch of weariness in the voice, and an edge of irritation and anger.

"Alright Bullfrog. Steady as you go. We're coming."

It was Ziggy Sprague.

To be continued…

The Saga Continues…

Kirov Saga: *Nine Days Falling-Vol. II*

The war continues on both land and sea as China invades Taiwan and North Korea joins to launch a devastating attack. Yet *Kirov* and the heart of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet has vanished, blown into the past by the massive wrath of the Demon Volcano. There Captain Karpov finds himself at the dying edge of the last great war, yet his own inner demons now wage war with his conscience as he contemplates another decisive intervention.

After secretly assisting the Soviet invasion of the Kuriles and engaging a small US scouting force in the region, Karpov has drawn the attention of Admiral Halsey's powerful 3rd Fleet. Now Halsey sends one of the toughest fighting Admirals of the war north to investigate, the hero of the Battle off Samar, Ziggy Sprague, and fast and furious sea battles are the order of the day.

Meanwhile tensions rise in the Black Sea as the Russian mission to rescue Fedorov and Orlov has now been expanded to include a way to try and deliver new control rods to *Kirov* from the same batch and lot as the mysterious Rod-25. Will they work? Yet Admiral Volsky learns that the Russian Black Sea Fleet has engaged well escorted units of a British oil conveyor, Fairchild Inc., and the fires of war soon endanger his mission.

All efforts are now focused on a narrow stretch of coastline on the Caspian Sea, where men of war from the future and past are locked in a desperate struggle to decide the outcome of history itself. Naval combat, both future and past, combine with action and intrigue as Volsky's mission is launched and the mystery of Rod-25 and Fedorov's strange experience on the Trans-Siberian Rail is finally revealed. Can they stop the nuclear holocaust of the Third World War in 2021 or will it begin off the coast of Japan in 1945?

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Kirov II – Cauldron of Fire

Kirov crosses the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea when she suddenly slips in time again and re-appears a year later, in August of 1942. Beset with enemies on every side and embroiled in one of the largest sea battles of the war, the ship races for Gibraltar and the relatively safe waters of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the brilliant Alan Turing has begun to unravel the mystery of what this ship could be, but can he convince the Admiralty? Naval action abounds in this fast paced second volume of the *Kirov* series trilogy.

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Admiral Tovey's visit to Bletchley Park soon reaches an astounding conclusion when the battlecruiser *Kirov* vanishes once again to a desolate future. Reaching the Pacific the ship's officers and crew soon learn that *Kirov* has once again moved in time. Now First Officer Anton Fedorov is shocked to learn the true source of the great variation in time that has led to the devastated future they have come from and the demise of civilization itself. They are soon discovered by a Japanese fleet and the ship now faces its most dangerous and determined challenge ever when they are stalked by the Japanese 5th Carrier Division and eventually confronted by a powerful enemy task force led by the battleship Yamato, and an admiral determined to sink this phantom ship, or die trying. In this amazing continuation to the popular *Kirov* series, the most powerful ships ever conceived by two different eras clash in a titanic final battle that could decide the fate of nations and the world itself.

Kirov Saga: *Men Of War*

Kirov returns home to a changed world in the year 2021, and as the Russian Naval Inspectorate probes the mystery of the ship's disappearance,

Anton Fedorov begins to unravel yet another dilemma—the secret of Rod 25. The world is again steering a dangerous course toward the great war that blackened the shores of a distant future glimpsed by the officers and crew. Fedorov has come to believe that time is waiting on the resolution of one crucial unresolved element from their journey to the past—the fate of Gennadi Orlov.

Join Admiral Leonid Volsky, Captain Vladimir Karpov, and Anton Fedorov as they sleuth the mystery of Orlov's fate and launch a mission to the past to find him before the world explodes in the terror and fury of a great air and naval conflict in the Pacific. It is a war that will span the globe from the Gulf of Mexico to the Middle East and through the oil rich heart of Central Asia to the wide Pacific, but somehow one man's life holds the key to its prevention. Yet other men are aware of Orlov's identity as a crewman from the dread raider they came to call *Geronimo*, and they too set their minds on finding him first…in 1942! Men of war from the future and past now join in the hunt while the military forces of Russia, China, and the West maneuver to the great chessboard of impending conflict.

Kirov Saga: *Nine Days Falling, Vol. I*

As Fedorov launches his daring mission to the past to rescue Orlov, Volsky does not know where or how to find the team, or even if they have safely made the dangerous transition to the 1940s….But other men know, from the dark corners of Whitehall to the KGB. And other men also continue to stalk Orlov in that distant era, led by Captain John Haselden and the men of 30 Commando. The long journey west is fraught with danger for Fedorov's team when they encounter something bewildering and truly astounding, an incident that leads them deeper into the mystery of Rod-25.

Meanwhile, *Kirov* has put to sea and now forms the heart of a powerful battlegroup commanded by Captain Vladimir Karpov. He is soon confronted by the swift deployment of the American Carrier Strike Group Five out of Yokosuka Japan in a tense standoff at sea that threatens to explode into violence at any moment. The fuse of conflict is lit across the globe, for the dread war has finally begun when the Chinese make good on their threat to secure their long wayward son—Taiwan. From the pulsing bitstream of the Internet, the deep void of outer space, the oil soaked waters of the Persian Gulf and Black Sea, to the riveting naval combat in the Pacific, the world descends in nine grueling days, swept up in the maelstrom and chaos of war.

This is the story of that deadly war to end all wars, and the desperate missions from the future and past to find the one man who can prevent it from ever happening, Gennadi Orlov. Can the mystery of Rod-25 and Orlov be solved before the ICBMs are finally launched?

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Book IV: *Anvil of Fate*
The cryptic ending of Touchstone dovetails perfectly into this next volume as

Paul insists that Kelly has survived, and is determined to bring him safely home. Only now is the true meaning of the stela unearthed at Rosetta made apparent—a grand scheme to work a catastrophic transformation of the Meridians, so dramatic and profound in its effect that the disaster at Palma was only a precursor. The history leads them to the famous Battle of Tours where Charles Martel strove to stem the tide of the Moorish invaders and save the west from annihilation. Yet more was at stake on the Anvil of Fate than the project team first realized, and they now pursue the mystery of two strange murders that will decide the fate of Western Civilization itself!

Book V: *Golem 7*
Nordhausen is back with new research and his hand on the neck of the new terrorist behind the much feared "Palma Event." Now the project team struggles to discover how and where the Assassins have intervened to restore the chaos of Palma, and their search leads them on one of the greatest naval sagas of modern history—the hunt for the battleship *Bismarck*. For some unaccountable reason the fearsome German battleship was not sunk on its maiden voyage, and now the project team struggles to put the ship back in its watery grave. Meet Admiral John Tovey and Chief of Staff "Daddy" Brind as the Royal Navy begins to receive mysterious intelligence from an agent known only as "Lonesome Dove." Exciting naval action and top notch research characterize this fast paced alternate history of the sinking of the *Bismarck*.

Note: *Golem 7 is the book that led author John Schettler to continue his exploration of alternate history naval fiction in the breakthrough Kirov series trilogy.*

Historical Fiction

Taklamakan ~ The Land Of No Return
It was one of those moments on the cusp of time, when Tando Ghazi Khan, a simple trader of tea and spice, leads a caravan to the edge of the great desert, and becomes embroiled in the struggle that will decide the fate of an empire and shake all under heaven and earth. A novel of the Silk Road, the empire of Tibet clashes with T'ang China on the desolate roads that fringe the Taklamakan desert, and one man holds the key to victory in a curious map

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