

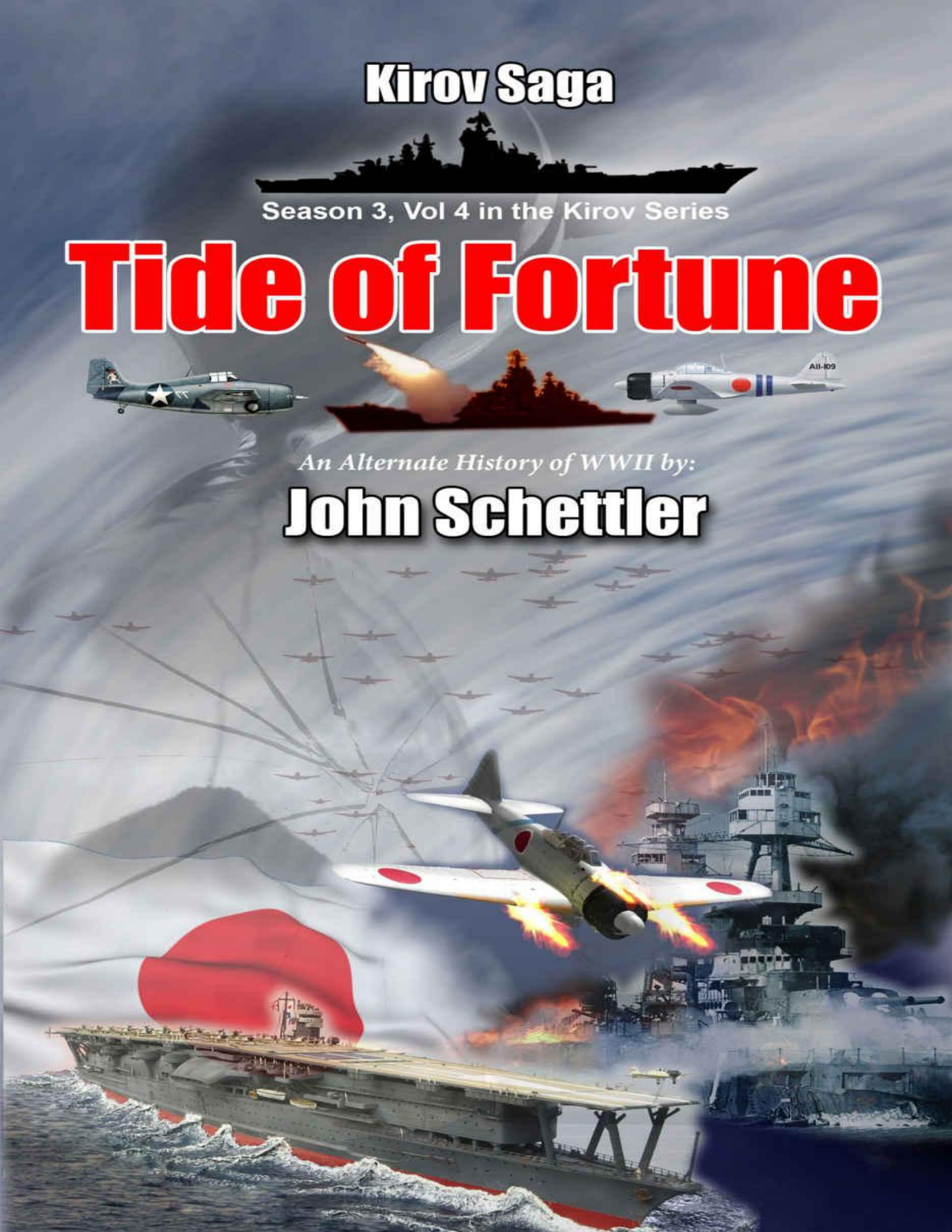
Kirov Saga

Season 3, Vol 4 in the Kirov Series

Tide of Fortune

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Tide Of Fortune

By

John Schettler

A publication of: *The Writing Shop Press*
Tide Of Fortune Copyright©2015, John A. Schettler

KIROV SERIES:

The Kirov Saga: Season One

Kirov - Kirov Series - Volume 1
Cauldron Of Fire - Kirov Series - Volume 2
Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume 3
Men Of War - Kirov Series - Volume 4
Nine Days Falling - Kirov Series - Volume 5
Fallen Angels - Kirov Series - Volume 6
Devil's Garden - Kirov Series - Volume 7
Armageddon – Kirov Series – Volume 8

The Kirov Saga: Season Two

Altered States– Kirov Series – Volume 9
Darkest Hour– Kirov Series – Volume 10
Hinge Of Fate– Kirov Series – Volume 11
Three Kings – Kirov Series – Volume 12
Grand Alliance – Kirov Series – Volume 13
Hammer Of God – Kirov Series – Volume 14
Crescendo Of Doom – Kirov Series – Volume 15
Paradox Hour – Kirov Series – Volume 16

The Kirov Saga: Season Three

Doppelganger – Kirov Series – Volume 17
Nemesis – Kirov Series – Volume 18
Winter Storm – Kirov Series – Volume 19
Tide Of Fortune – Kirov Series – Volume 20
Knight's Move – Kirov Series – Volume 21

More to come...

Kirov Saga:
Tide Of Fortune

By

John Schettler

Kirov Saga:
Tide Of Fortune

By
John Schettler

[Part I – *Moscow Is Burning*](#)

[Part II – *Day of Infamy*](#)

[Part III – *Ultimatum*](#)

[Part IV – *The Lost Convoy*](#)

[Part V – *Rooks' Gambit*](#)

[Part VI – *Wolf in the Fold*](#)

[Part VII – *Aftermath*](#)

[Part VIII – *Rain of Fire*](#)

[Part IX – *Audacity*](#)

[Part X – *Operation Condor*](#)

[Part XI – *The Dragon*](#)

[Part XII – *Invincible*](#)

Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

Don't peek now or you'll spoil the read, but at the end of this volume, I will stick in a slice of a poem by T. S. Eliot, the man I erroneously credited as the author of *Ulysses* some volumes ago when referring to the name of a British ship! How silly of me. That book was, of course, written by James Joyce, and as an old English Major, I can't imagine how I confused the two at that moment. Here then, in quoting Eliot, I also ask the reader's pardon for the fact that I tacked on commas at the end of his lines, and let me explain why.

I have what I consider the world's finest text to speech voice, that of a nice English gentleman, and I use it to read the entire book aloud to me so I can catch the many errors I make while typing. Yes, years and years ago, I took Mechanical Drawing instead of Typing for my last elective in High School, and unable to teach this old dog new tricks, I am now forced to use what I call "The Columbus System" when I type. I discover keys and land on them. So if I leave those punctuation marks out of Eliot's verse, my speech reader, or one used by anyone else out there, will simply rush on through, line to line, and muddle the whole thing into one continuous run-on sentence. The verse then loses all of its impact and drama.

To correct things like that, I often punctuate my own writing with a liberal use of the comma, so that my text reader pauses where it should, which creates a more natural flow when the text is read aloud by one of those little digital wonders. In earlier volumes I've tried dictating text to get around my typing thing, but to no avail. The program then makes clever little errors that are even more difficult to catch than an obvious typo. I hope I'm getting better with the effort to produce a clean manuscript. "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

I was, however, taken to the woodshed recently by one crew member for using too many exclamation points! Like Orlov, he declared that he was sadly jumping ship for nudging him too often with that little stroke and dot. Sorry to offend. I would first like to thank him for reading as far as he did in the series. My only response is perhaps perfectly captured in this wonderful scene from the movie *Amadeus*, and I will let it speak my mind on this reader's complaint in a brief video clip:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCud8H7z7vU>

That said, I sometimes need these “notes,” certain punctuation marks, to coax my text reader into trying to emphasize something a little more, and so you see, there is always a method to my madness, and only as many notes as I require. I am writing and punctuating the text in a way that is intended to produce a natural sounding read by one of these digital programs.

In recent volumes, I’ve had a good long battle with my text to speech program in order to get it to pronounce Japanese names correctly, and with mixed results. There will soon be a good number of those coming your way, but before I take you back to the heat of Pearl Harbor, let us first return to Moscow to learn the fate of a very important man. For this entire stack of books was called the *Kirov Series*, and for a very good reason. Oh yes.... Let me make one more promise here. By the end of this volume it will finally be 1942.

Thanks to all of you who write with questions. I try to answer them all, and often then put things you ask about into the story for further explanation.

Enjoy the read!

- *John Schettler*

Part I

Moscow is Burning

*“Among famous traitors of history,
one might mention the weather”*

— **Ilka Chase**

Chapter 1

The situation in Moscow had descended into the chaos of panic. That single company of German troops, the men of the 61st Motorcycle Recon Company, was helping themselves to a good meal when the People's Militia, Moscow Division, arrived to make a last ditch defense just beyond the main fortified positions near Solntsevo. The 61st Company was driven out of the homes they had occupied under pressure from two regiments from this division, but they were soon joined by other small units from the 11th Panzer Division that had filtered through the increasingly porous defensive lines in the southwest quadrant of the city.

The 231st Recon Battalion arrived at a most crucial moment, with twelve armored cars, a few 4.7cm Pak 35Rs, another company of motorcycle troops, and two more companies of grenadiers mounted in SdKfz 251s. They were followed closely by the 86th Pioneer Battalion, hardened assault squads that had three SdKfz 6/2 self propelled AA guns in support. That firepower, and the skill of those veteran German grenadiers and pioneers, would prove more than the untrained militias could handle.

Seven kilometers to the rear, the rest of the German 11th Panzer Division was about to push through and around the last stubborn defenders in their way, the men of the 77th Machinegun Battalion. That unit had held the small hamlet of Yuknovo for six hours, then, their ammunition exhausted, their hot barrels went silent, and the German grenadiers advanced on their positions to hurl potato mashers into the farm houses and blast them to hell.

At that moment, the fate of the city was hanging by the barest thread, and it was strange that after months of grueling and bitter fighting over a thousand kilometers of Russian territory, with a million dead on either side, that the battle was to be decided by this scattering of small units, there on the outskirts of the capital.

Yet it was the well timed fire of another kind that finally broke the defense. Beria had been behind it, his cohorts moving surreptitiously in a few trucks with barrels of gasoline, and placing them at designated building sites along a carefully chosen path. Sergei Kirov may have refused to give the order for Operation Black Snow, but Beria took it upon himself to set it all in motion even before he paid his visit to the General Secretary. The fires ignited, soon becoming a raging conflagration, and the hot cinders of panic

blew into the city on that darksome wind. It began to burn a path to the northeast, which drove the flames deeper into the dense metropolis, and right towards the lines of the Moscow Militia Division.

Intelligence Chief Berzin had just arrived at the Kremlin, coming in through the lower back stairway, a quiet, hidden passage up to the Archives that was only used by he and Kirov. On the way in he had seen truckloads of Beria's NKVD pulling in to Red Square, the troops leaping from the trucks in their dark green uniforms, the black boots hard on the wet cobblestone tiles. Something in their purposeful movements alerted him to danger, his instincts well honed after many years in the GRU.

He pulled a Lieutenant in the Kremlin Guard aside, and quietly whispered something to him, sending the man running off down a long corridor. There were three battalions of the Guard there, but even as Berzin hastened up that back stairway, he could hear the shrill warning call of a whistle blown by some unseen Commandant, and the sound froze his blood. That was NKVD. He knew it in his bones, and the whistle was answered by three more, like predatory birds calling to one another in the night.

He reached the top of the stairs, was in through the antechamber, hearing the muffled voice of Sergei Kirov, and Beria's in answer. What was that man doing here? Beria's unexpected presence, and the arrival of those NKVD troops, all screamed a warning in Berzin's mind. His heart racing, he reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a pistol, his grip hard as he reached for the last doorknob between him and the outer chamber of the archives.

The two guards outside those high lacquered doors jumped at the sharp crack of a pistol, then two more. Eyes wide, weapons quickly at the ready, they shouldered through the doorway, their faces hard and tense. There, stooping over the body of the General Secretary, was Intelligence Chief Berzin, the smoke still rising from the pistol in his hand. And on the floor, his dark blood spreading in a dull crimson stain on the plush carpet, lay the man who had come just minutes before, NKVD Chief Beria.

One of the soldiers instinctively leveled his weapon at Berzin, but the hard shout of the Chief's voice froze him like a statue. "Wait! He shouted. "By God! Call the Physician! Tell him to go to the underground bunker!"

Even as he pushed through, Beria had fired, and seeing what was happening in a wild split second, Berzin fired next. The first shot struck the General Secretary, high on the chest, near his shoulder, for Berzin's sudden

entry had distracted the deadly NKVD man just enough to foil his aim for Kirov's heart.

Berzin's aim was better, the last two sharp rounds heard by the guards, and with Beria slumping to the floor, he rushed to Sergei Kirov's side, just as the Guards burst in.

Now the sound of submachine gun fire echoed with its raucous noise in the Kremlin complex. It was answered by more gunfire, then a loud explosion. Beria may have fallen, but his plan, a perverted and corrupted version of the Black Snow operation, was still in motion. His three battalions were now dueling with the Kremlin Guard, with demolition charges being set off at key points, collapsing roofs and stair wells in the labyrinthine government complex.

The four brutes Beria had come with had been down the long hallway outside the Archives standing in a small room, and watched by one of the Kremlin Guardsmen. With the sound of that first pistol round, they lunged at the man, overpowering him and seizing his submachine gun. Now they were out through the door, thick necks twisting to look for more guards. One sentry saw them and fired, dropping one of Beria's men heavily to the polished floor before he was himself cut down by the captured submachine gun.

Berzin could hear what was happening and knew he had to get Kirov out of that room as fast as he could. One hand on Kirov's wounded shoulder to staunch the bleeding, he labored to drag the General Secretary to the far door, the last door, the entrance to the inner chambers of the Red Archives. Inside, behind a false movable bookshelf, there was a hidden service elevator that would descend down a long passage, deep underground to a special bomb proof bunker.

He got Kirov inside the inner chamber, lifting him up onto a nearby sofa, then rushed to slam the tall heavy wood doors shut, locking them. Then he moved quickly to the bookshelves, the cold light from a chandelier gleaming off the sweat of his brow. There was a book, its thick red spine very evident, a book that was never touched or read, except in an emergency such as this one. He reached for it, hearing hard footfalls in the outer chamber. Pulling the book from its top released a securing pin, and the bookshelf moved, sliding open with squeaky wheels to reveal the gold painted metal grill of the elevator door.

He heard a deep voice shouting, gunfire, another machinegun, and then

an explosion. Beria's men were the very best he could find, and though they had been disarmed, one had a false heel in his boot, where a tiny grenade had been concealed. He had stooped to twist off that boot heel, pulled out the explosive, yanked off the pin and slid the thin device right under the door where it had just exploded. It was not a heavy charge, but enough to clip the shin of one of those two Kremlin Guardsmen holding near the door while his comrade struggled with the phone to call the physicians. The guard fell just as Beria's men kicked open the door, blasting away with that captured gun. The second guard was cut down, the receiver now swaying at the end of its short cord as it dangled from the phone on the desk. Berzin knew he had only seconds now, with the fate of all Russia on his broad shoulders as he hefted the body of Sergei Kirov up and got him into that elevator.

Breathing hard, he heard the thump of a thick shoulder on the heavy inner doors. His eyes wide with the heat of that moment, he realized these men could not be allowed to enter that room and find what lay there, unseen by the eyes of any other man for decades—the cache of secret books and documents—‘the material.’ In a split second he knew it all had to be destroyed, and there was only one way. He ran to the long map table, where the sharp arrows of the German advance had been drawn through the thick penciled lines Kirov had made for the outer defensive rings of the city. Just days ago he had carried that very map here, marking the positions of every unit that now struggled so gallantly to hold those lines.

Two kerosene lamps guttered on the table, a third on a nearby desk, more reliable than the electricity that now quavered and went dark in the crystal chandeliers above. He had one lamp in hand in a second, smashing it down on the map table and drenching the whole scene with oil and fire. He threw the second on the low bookshelf that had the few sacred volumes Kirov had discovered, but not before grasping one and tucking it under his arm.

The door shuddered under another heavy blow, and now he stiffly pointed his arm at it, firing the pistol right through the thick lacquered wood. That was immediately answered by submachine gun fire just as he threw the final kerosene lamp down and saw the fires blaze up when the oil ignited. Yes, Moscow was burning now, within and without, and only one man stood on the line fate had drawn on its own mysterious battle map that hour.

Jan Karlovich Berzin, code name Starik, the “Old Man” as he was called by the Kremlin Guard, now dragged the hope of Soviet Russia deeper into that elevator, the metal doors closing just as the enemy machinegun fire

riddled the bolt of the outer door and it burst open. He saw the windows shatter from the heat of the flames, a cold wind sweeping into the chamber, and the fire rising higher there. Berzin had stood by Sergei Kirov, his strong right arm, for decades, and now he was earning his Order of Lenin medal, the Red Banner, and Order of the Red Star all in one hot minute.

The elevator started to move, even while Berzin fired the last three rounds of his pistol at the dark shadows hunched at the edge of those flames. He caught a last glimpse of the city beyond the window, the spires of tall buildings outside engulfed in that terrible inferno, the skies stained and streaked with char black smoke on the harsh early winter wind. Then the descent accelerated, the squeak of the metal pulleys like the wail of a mother who had just lost her only child. His breath heaving, he finally knelt over Kirov, his thick, well muscled body shielding the General Secretary just in case one of those men above fired down at the elevator as it descended.

Kirov's eyes opened, watery and unfocused, but settled on the hard, handsome lines of his long time comrade's face. "Grishin..." His voice was weak as he whispered his old friend's nickname.

"Don't worry sir," said Berzin. "We will be in the bunker in another second, and I will have a doctor there a minute after. Don't worry..."

That same night, the small gathering of German units built up outside the main belt of the city like that fire. In fact, the raging flames were so intense, that they literally cut a pathway right through the Moscow Militia Division, forcing the men and women on that last thin barrier of defense to flee for their lives. The Donskoi Monastery burned, the Alexdrina Palace and City Hospital, with Customs House and Konaya Place devastated, just off Little Serpukhov Street. The Germans pushed on, following those flames as the bulk of the 11th Panzer Division broke into the ruined, charred city, and the tanks began to grind their way through the black rubble and smoke.

The terrible fires raged on, driven northeast on the rising winter storm. They burned through the Yakimanskaya District and the place that would one day be the Fallen Monument Park. They immolated the elegantly styled hotels and restaurants, and the tall warrens of apartments that had long ago been abandoned by the citizenry. They leapt over the angled concrete canal embankment constructed in 1908 to control flooding.

The Germans followed those flames, the leading unit now being the men of the 86th Pioneer Battalion. When they reached that canal they were just half a kilometer from the Moskva River, where they found the high concrete

span of the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge still standing, and now completely unguarded. It was the second bridge to bear that name, for the first one had been built with wood in 1829, destroyed by another fire in 1871. The steel arches of this new bridge had been built right on the original abutments, one of the biggest and strongest bridges over the river, and the only one in reinforced concrete built in the previous decade. Its pink granite arches were now stained with char from the heavy smoke, but it stood inviolate, though unguarded, eight lanes wide. It was the last bridge, over the last river, in the long violent campaign Germany had waged to reach this place.

The weary men of the 86th Pioneers reached the southern ramps leading up to the double concrete span, and looked across the river to see the golden onion domes of the Kremlin spires. There the great tops of the Savior and Saint Nicholas towers stood watch over the Lenin Mausoleum, the marble and polished granite now marred and chipped with the violence of a recent gun battle. To their surprise, the men could hear the sound of machinegun fire coming from the other side of the river, and soon wondered if some of their comrades had also broken through further north.

The only comrades involved in that fighting were now the men of Beria's NKVD and the three battalions of the Kremlin Guard. The head of the Moscow garrison was already dead, killed by a mortar round as his car sped along a narrow street leading to Red Square. The guard he had posted on Lenin's Tomb, known always as the "Number One Sentry" of the Socialist Republic, was no longer there. The body of Lenin had left the city the previous week, an early part of the Black Snow operation that had been triggered the instant German troops came within 50 kilometers. Lenin was still sleeping peacefully, his body on a train headed for Siberia, yet his unseen soul in turmoil to witness what was happening.

Now the fires of treachery and war were at the very heart of the city, threatening to destroy the priceless state regalia, the treasures long hoarded by the Tsars, and all the religious and cultural icons dating back centuries. But Red Square existed for a very special reason. It was part of a plan laid down by Ivan III, to eliminate any wooden building in that sector of the city in case of fire. The broad bend of the Moskva River, and the fact that the flames now found nothing but brick and concrete in their path, slowly checked the advance of the fire. Now it was only the fire in men's hearts that posed the threat, and in the arms and guns of the 86th Pioneer Battalion.

Tired, low on ammunition, their numbers barely enough to make a

reinforced company now, the pioneers gathered in small groups, with Sergeants and Lieutenants shouting orders as assault teams quickly formed for a classic cross-bridge attack. The first team was up, the men falling prone with their light machineguns braced on twin metal legs. Then two of the three SdKfz 6/2 AA guns led the way, the assault squads right behind them. Operation Typhoon, the agonizing effort of hundreds of thousands of men and machines, was now reduced to this one point, the *Schwerpunkt* of the 11th Panzer Division, as the 86th Pioneers fought their way over that bridge into Red Square.

Inside the magnificent site of Saint Basil's Church, the sound of their machinegun fire resounded from the high arched ceiling, echoing from every gilded cornice and nave, and from the ceiling dome covered with paintings of the saints, and the fiery red winged angels that guarded heaven above. At the top of one tower, the soft artistry of a Madonna and Christ child listened, as the leading edge of that tide of war grew ever closer, the Blessed Virgin seeming to weep. That church had been built on the orders of Ivan the Terrible in 1555, as a kind of memorial to all soldiers and civilians that had ever perished in the defense of Russia, and her many battles to liberate the sacred soil of the homeland from the insult of foreign invaders.

The cathedral itself was shaped to resemble the rising flames of a bonfire dancing up into the sky, with seven ornate towers clustered together at varying heights. Now it was mimicked by the blazing city to the south and west, as temples of destruction formed in the high flowing spirals of flame. Inside that styled fairy castle, some of the most elegant and intricate architecture of the city, the faces on the statues and icons waited beneath the tall reach of the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great. Soon that bell began to ring, its heavy sonorous warning seeming a last cry of alarm as the violence of war pierced the heart of Moscow.

Just outside, 7.62mm bullets were ricocheting off the green stain on the old bronze statue to Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky, the men who had rallied the volunteer armies of Mother Russia in what was known as the 'Time of Troubles.'

Soon the intrepid pioneers of the 86th Battalion would be over that bridge, their boots on the grey and tan bricks of the fabled Red Square. They would stand in the imposing shadow of cathedrals and the old neoclassical architecture of the Russian Senate buildings, and the Arsenal built in 1702, their long quest finally over.

The Time of Troubles had come again, an understatement to all that was now happening, as one of the world's most strategic and important cities burned in the hard steel gauntlet on the barbarous hand of war.

Chapter 2

The underground bunker might have been the final redoubt in the city that day, held by two men, one felled by the bullet of a turncoat traitor, the other his trusted savior and guardian. The physicians reached the bunker through the side tunnel entrance, and men of the Kremlin Guard entered with them. Two men came in with a stretcher, and a ten man squad followed with Lieutenant Ryakin, the same man Berzin had whispered these quiet orders to before he went up to the Red Archives.

Berzin stood and waited, his hands red with the blood of Sergei Kirov, while the two doctors in attendance examined his fallen friend and leader. The General Secretary lay unconscious, and one of the doctors was quickly rigging a plasma transfer unit to the stretcher.

“He will live,” said the lead caretaker, Kirov’s personal physician, Doctor Kormalev. “The bullet missed all the major arteries, though he has obviously lost a good deal of blood.

“We must move him,” said Berzin, “and that quickly.”

“I might advise against it, but given the circumstances, I think we can keep him stabilized. Give me another five minutes.”

The doctor administered his patient, while Berzin turned to Lieutenant Ryakin. “What is happening above?” he asked.

“The situation is unclear. But the NKVD sir! What are they doing?”

“That’s not regular NKVD,” said Berzin. “Those are Beria’s men. That rat put this bullet into the General Secretary, and it was only God’s will that I was there to stop him from finishing the job. Do you have men on subway line number six as I ordered?”

“Three squads, sir. It was all I could find before the fighting started.”

“Then with your squad added in, that will have to do. Send two men to make sure the underground passage is still safe. We move to tunnel six directly.”

That was one of several subterranean passages that led away from the bunker. It would take a path beneath the old Bolshoi Theatre, where there was another hidden access point to the underground network near Kirov’s personal balcony. From there it would angle towards the Post and Telegraph Station, go beneath the Red Gate off Sadovaya Street, and eventually reach St. Petersburg Railway Station. There, on a secure rail spur guarded by

reliable GRU men, was a heavily armored train. In spite of Kirov's order to the contrary, Berzin had quietly seen it loaded with certain personal effects, clothing, uniforms, books from the General Secretary's private residence. Kirov had all but isolated himself in the Red Archive the last three weeks, and never knew what his Intelligence Chief was planning.

Now Berzin chided himself for the lapse that had allowed a man like Beria to get so close to Sergei Kirov in this critical hour. That remark the man had made about Ivan Volkov should have rung the last alarm bell, he thought. How could I have overlooked him, or failed to see those NKVD battalions slipping into the city? My God! Beria was Volkov's man all along. When did he turn? How long ago? How much crucial information did he pass to Volkov before I finally gunned him down—something I should have done years ago. The man was a vile wretch, if ever there was one.

He realized now that Beria's assassination plot here could only be the tip of the iceberg. I have killed the spider, thought Berzin, but his web still remains. What else is happening now? Has Beria activated his entire network? How many men turned with him? What might they be up to?

Think, he told himself. Kirov told me that Volkov knows all this history so well that he could have written every book in the material. That's gone now, hopefully burned and black, except the one volume I managed to secure. But Volkov isn't a man from this time. He's come from another floor in the hotel. That was how Sergei tried to explain it to me once. He's come to us from the distant future.

Berzin found that thought chilling, making Volkov the most dangerous foe they might ever face. At least Hitler was a man of this day and age, graspable, understandable, predictable, but not Ivan Volkov. This was clearly a very carefully staged plan, triggered by the German army as it passed some invisible trip wire on the map in its march on Moscow.

The question now is this, he thought. Who else is working for the other side? What about the generals? Volkov knows what we learned from the material. He knows who succeeds, and who fails, and therefore who to kill, and who he can safely ignore. Might there be other assassination attempts underway at this very moment? And what about the ministers and other government officials? Who is loyal?

There are some men I know I can count on, others who have always raised suspicions in my mind. I shall have to instigate a little Red Purge all on my own if we can survive this and get safely out of the city. But that is my

first priority. I must see the General Secretary to safety, and then activate my network. To hell with Black Snow, now we get *Red Rain*.

That was Berzin's secret plan for dealing with the chaos of this very moment, foreseen by him as a real possibility long ago. It was far grander in scope than the simple evacuation plan for the capital. It would ripple throughout his entire intelligence network, setting hidden cadres in motion to secure vital records, access to key mines and facilities, and also post men around vital statesman, ambassadors, ministers, key generals that he and Sergei Kirov had vetted long ago.

Yet it was more than that, more than a series of protective defensive measures. *Red Rain* was also a plan of attack. The GRU had infiltrated virtually every government on earth. They had men in Washington DC, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and even Orenburg. The code they would receive would set certain events in motion. Men would be moving along dark streets and alleyways this very night. Others would be tapping out coded signals on hidden radio sets behind enemy lines. They would network with Partisan groups, and soon initiate a series of attacks all along the lines of communication Germany's armies depended on. Others would be training sniper rifles on key enemy targets. Well placed bombs would go off at the stroke of midnight, sounding a crescendo of doom.

He knew he would not get to Volkov. That man knew enough to isolate himself if he was going to turn a rat like Beria loose tonight in this city. But he would get to many other enemies, returning the bullet Beria had put into Kirov a hundred times over before another week had passed.

It would be a series of covert operations, small commando units operating against selected targets. The damage they might do would not be immediately visible, but it would amount to a great deal when added up by men who knew the names and nature of the men on Berzin's hit list. *Red Rain* was going to fall on the high and mighty along with the hidden and lost. It would target any man marked as a possible enemy agent, and more overtly, it would gun down enemy statesmen, ambassadors, key officers in many other nations, even as Berzin's men were now already scrambling to protect these same analogs within Russia.

And what about the Siberians, thought Berzin? What about this Vladimir Karpov? Is he really the loyal patriot he made himself out to be when he dickered for control of that strange ship? Yes... What do I do about Karpov, and what do I do about that hamlet on the Trans Siberian Rail, the place

Kirov told me about at Ilanskiy?

First things first. I do not even know if I can get Kirov safely out of this city. And I must get men ready in Leningrad, and all along the rail route I've selected. And we'll need air cover...

His muse was interrupted by Lieutenant Ryakin, returning quickly with a warning in his eyes. "Sir," he called. "The tunnels have been infiltrated. We must move immediately!"

Berzin looked at Doctor Kormalev, who nodded, and then he had two men lift the stretcher, carefully carrying Kirov out through the narrow door. They disappeared into a darkened tunnel and fled like silent wraiths through the long shadowy grey subway. The overhead lights strung along the roof at intervals, suddenly fluttered, then went out. Complete darkness surrounded them, until the Lieutenant flicked a cigarette lighter, and one of his men produced a small field lantern from his backpack.

"This route is clear," said Ryakin. "It will get us as far as the Bolshoi Theatre. After that..."

Berzin nodded grimly.

It was a little over half a mile to the place where this subterranean tunnel crept beneath the Bolshoi Theatre, and there was no way out of that line until it reached that point. That was the hardest moment for Berzin. He recalled the look on Beria's face one day when a messenger had interrupted a performance at the Bolshoi. They had all been with Kirov in his private balcony, and when the General Secretary left suddenly, Beria gave him an odd look. The man excused himself and Berzin later learned that he went outside. There, one of Berzin's men told him that the NKVD man had searched about for a moment, then asked him if the General Secretary had passed this way, to which the man answered a decided negative.

Beria was always suspicious about that theater from that day on, and on more than one occasion the GRU had to shoo away supposed workmen trying to access the sewage system through a nearby manhole. One was later followed and found to be NKVD. That was when Berzin realized that Beria was fishing, and from the material, he knew the man was fond of using hidden tunnels and secret rooms. He even had one in the Kremlin where he could secretly listen to Stalin's conversations, but Berzin made sure that never happened this time around.

What if Beria discovered that tunnel entrance at the Bolshoi? Would he have men waiting for them there? Lieutenant Ryakin and five men of his

squad were leading, with three behind them in case they were followed. Yet Berzin felt they were like mice in a hole with no way out, though he was greatly relieved when they reached the theater junction safely.

There they found a rail line spur on this special subway route, where a small hand car was waiting. The men got Kirov onto the car, with the two physicians, and the two stretcher bearers mounted with Berzin.

It was at that moment that the echo of distant footsteps could be heard in the tunnel behind them, and Berzin knew they had been discovered. He was forced to leave two men there at the junction as a rear guard. Then the forward group was off at a run, scouting well ahead as the men operated the see-saw levers on the hand car to get it moving. The pace seemed agonizingly slow, with Berzin looking over his shoulder, and making sure his own body was shielding Kirov where he lay on the stretcher. They had gone a half mile when the sharp report of gunfire, magnified in the enclosed tunnel, came echoing after them.

The guards ahead moved faster, knowing there was trouble behind. They passed the thick red stripe painted on the wall that told Berzin they were now beneath the Post and Telegraph Office. That was a danger point. If Beria was thinking to make a coup of this little assassination plot, he would certainly have men there to seize that vital communications hub. Had he found the one secret access ladder down to the tunnel?

As they continued on, he breathed easier. No one had challenged them, for Beria had not found that line. Instead he had men closely guarding the Polytechnic Museum and General Exchange, two facilities a little northeast of the Kremlin. A rail spur ran along Pokrovka Street to Kursk Rail station, which was south of the big St. Petersburg facility, and much closer to the Kremlin itself. Beria's NKVD were there at the Kursk Station, and further on up the line at the Red Gate. Yet when a detachment had been sent to the St. Petersburg Station, they found two squads of Berzin's men there, who ordered them off at gunpoint.

Beria would have corrected that little flaw in his plan when he got the report. But Beria was dead. That said, those men charged with guarding that main rail hub had simply retreated a few blocks to the Ryazan Station and notified their section Chief for orders. It would be an hour before two trucks would arrive and a Lieutenant with a bright blue cap and thick red stripe appeared, with two more squads of Beria's men. That was the hour Sergie Kirov was making his secret way right beneath their feet, under the Red Gate

triumphal arch first built in 1702, and under Ryazan Station to the main facility, called Leningradskiy Vokzal in modern times.

By the time Berzin's men reached the terminal, there was already fighting underway. The GRU were surprised to see their commanding officer, and Berzin issued crisp orders, telling his men to fight and secure their left flank. Machinegun fire ricocheted off the steel rails and stone bricked yard, and the stretcher team made a dash with Ryakin's squad, seeking the safety of an old rail car. There, the GRU men had set up a heavy machinegun, which was chattering fitfully, laying down good suppressive fire that enabled Ryakin to get his party safely behind the drab red metal boxcar.

They were trying to get another 100 meters to the small Yaroslef Station, which left the main rail hub on a separate line. It was shielded on one side by a small lake. The armored train was waiting for them there, camouflaged by heavy canvas tarps and masked on one side by a line of tall boxcars from an old freight train. By the time the NKVD realized what was happening, and began to shift their attack in that direction, Berzin had reached the train site.

There was a tense moment as they struggled to get the stretcher up onto the train, with bullets raking the old covering boxcars with a hard clatter. "Ryakin!" shouted Berzin. "Your men are with me. Move!"

Beria knew that the Black Snow plan had been designed to evacuate the government to old St Petersburg, Leningrad. So it was no surprise that he would try to secure that rail station, and Berzin knew that the line leaving the city from that point, heading northwest, would likely be fraught with peril. There were too many places a train could be ambushed on that line, so instead he planned to head northeast, on the line to Yaroslava. He knew that would be guarded as well, but gambled that the forces allocated would be much smaller than those on the main line. In this he was correct.

A shrill whistle cut through the air, and Berzin knew their enemies were signaling to one another, his ruse discovered, and probably gathering any forces they had left to make one last assault on the Yaroslaf Station. By the time the fighting was thickening up, with the green clad NKVD beginning to make assault rushes covered by their spitting submachine guns, the armored train had a full head of steam.

It was a heavy unit from the Railway Defense Service, Train Number 2, dubbed "Grom," and it was well armored, with two heavy 76mm guns in armored turrets, two more 57mm AT gun turrets, three twin AA guns, and

machineguns bristling from every side. During the Revolution and in the long years of fighting after, they had been the steel beetles on the rail lines, terror on the tracks as they rumbled from one place to another, laden with security men. Some later had heavy turrets mounted on them for good measure, sometimes tiered one above the other like a battleship.

Their one great weakness was the limited and predictable route they would have to follow on the rail lines, which made sabotage the preferred way of dealing with these armored monsters. Once derailed, they would be no more than heavily armored pill boxes, stuck in place. But to prevent that, each train mounted one or two special dummy cars in the front, which would be the first to slip off the rails in the event of sabotage.

Berzin knew the narrow rail line was a dangerous escape route, which was why he did not plan to be on this train very long. It would suit his purpose for the time being, able to fight its way out of the city if the lines were clear, and he had seen to that long ago. It would get them to an airfield north of Moscow, where he had Zhukov hold a full regiment of Airborne troops to make sure it was secure. Three transport planes and two well armed Petyakov Pe-8 four engine heavy bombers, with several Yak fighters would be waiting for the real escape, and their planned route and destination was not even known to the pilots.

Berzin was aboard with his all important charge, and rushed to the engine compartment, leaning in to the voice tube and shouting orders up to the twin MGs on the upper rear turret to say goodbye to Beria's men. It rotated quickly and put down withering fire, which snapped off the rail lines and cold stone pavement to cut down one NKVD assault team and send two others to ground.

The NKVD rallied and came on again, and this time Grom opened up with everything it had, the 76mm cannons blasting away, machineguns rattling, and the two 57mm guns targeting a truckload of fresh troops that had just pulled into the station. Berzin pulled the train whistle three times, a signal to men he had posted on the line ahead to make ready, and Sergei Kirov slowly headed out of the station on that train.

Chapter 3

So Sergei Kirov never made the speech he planned to give that night, but he escaped the fate Beria had planned for him, the dark spider at the center of Volkov's secret web in Moscow dead instead. It wasn't until they were safely on the planes, the engines roaring for takeoff, that Berzin finally relaxed, leaning heavily near the window as he fell asleep, exhausted. By his side the two doctors waited in attendance, doting over Kirov, and making sure everything possible was done to make him comfortable. They would fly 250 miles to a secret base near Vologda, about 350 miles east of Leningrad. There, Berzin planned to wait, gather intelligence, and see what the situation was in Leningrad itself.

Once on the ground, Kirov was moved in a well guarded truck to the Vologda Kremlin, a miniature version of the complex in Moscow, with the same ornate architecture, and silver onion domed towers of Saint Sophia's Church. The city itself was an important communications hub northwest of Moscow, commanding vital water channels and rivers that connected Moscow, Novgorod and even extended up to the White Sea. By the reign of Ivan the Terrible, it had become a major trade center, receiving ministers and representatives from many western countries. It had once been the regional HQ of the 6th Red Army during the Revolution. Given its importance, the city was heavily guarded, with strong AA defenses.

It seemed a perfect place to re-establish governmental authority, and Berzin's plan was to make it seem as if exactly that was happening there. He knew that any remnant of Beria's plan still operating might soon trace their rout, and realize where Kirov was. In fact, he made every pretence of demonstrating that, ordering numerous state flagged limousines to come and go, with men in dark coats exiting and entering the buildings of the little Kremlin, and a very visible security presence.

But Kirov would only stay there three days, until the doctors were certain his condition had stabilized and he was beginning to heal. Instead he was secretly driven out of the city on an old supply truck, where he took up residence on a farm commune well outside the city. All the guards there were dressed out as field workers, and heavy flak guns, and even three KV-II Tanks, were concealed beneath bales of hay. It became known as the "Barnyard Kremlin," the seat of all Soviet power now in exile, and there was much work to be done there as both Berzin and Kirov struggled to gather the

many reins of that power and re-establish control.

Kirov lay on a soft bed in the great room of the farm house when Berzin joined him for the first real briefing. He had collected all the information he could find, and now it was his sad charge again to be the bearer of all that bad news to his friend.

“Out with it, Grishin,” said Kirov, squinting at him through half closed eyes when the GRU man came in. “I know it’s more bad news. Look at your boots!”

Berzin smiled, looking down at his boots, now soiled with the sodden ground of the farm site. “You will forgive me for not polishing them up this morning,” he said with a smile. “I have been just a little too busy.”

“Then tell me,” said Kirov. “What’s happening in Moscow?”

The Germans are in the city, with at least one unit, their 11th Panzer Division. They came right in behind that damn fire Beria started, God roast his soul in hell for that.”

“How far did they get?”

“Right into Red Square,” said Berzin with a shrug, and Kirov closed his eyes.

“Then they took the Kremlin? All of it? They have the Archives?”

“No sir, I took care of that by lighting a little fire myself. It’s all gone, the maps, newspapers, and all the books, except this one.” He pointed to a nearby table where that single volume sat, still stained with Kirov’s own blood. There sat the new Red Archives, a history of the Great Patriotic War, a single book on a bedside table in a simple farm house north of Vologda.

“What else?”

“We are still getting information on the scope of Beria’s plan. But if he thought to install himself in your place there in the Kremlin, the Germans have already foiled that. They don’t have a secure grip on the capital yet, and Rokossovsky is still fighting on the roads west of the city.”

“What about the Siberians?” asked Kirov. “They should be there by now.”

“Zhukov pulled them off the trains north east of Serpukhov.”

“What? I gave him direct orders to send those troops to Moscow!”

“Easy sir, it could not be helped. Beria knew about those orders, and he also knew that army was the only force we could throw into the defense of the capital to try and prevent what just happened. So he and his little band of traitors sabotaged all those rail lines. They made it as far as Kolomna, but

Beria's men took down the rail bridge over the Oka there, and that was that. Zhukov had no choice in the matter. He sent a few of the recon battalions on by road, with some artillery, but the rifle divisions and ski brigades were never going to get there in time. No transport was available at Kolomna. With the Germans breaking through at Serpukhov, he moved that whole force towards Kashira to organize a counterattack on that flank."

Kirov shook his head. "How did they get to Serpukhov so easily?"

"The Germans have new tanks, sir. They are not distributed to the main force panzer divisions yet, but they concentrated a good many into a heavy brigade, and it broke through like a battering ram north of Tula some time ago. They got as far as Chekhov by the time Beria made his move. Now Zhukov is counterattacking."

"But will we lose Moscow?"

"For a time, and a third of the city or more will be in ruins if we ever get it back. Zhukov insists we will, and in fact, he says the Germans have stuck their head in a bee hive there, and he is planning to chop it off to put them out of their misery. It will be street fighting, house to house, and perhaps all winter."

"Then he is still planning to counterattack?"

"Yes, but we stole away most of the Armies he wanted for that. It will take some time, but we will hit them when the snows are thick around them, and the mobility of their panzer divisions is neutralized."

"We must make them pay for every block of that city," said Kirov. "We must make it a Stalingrad, just like that battle from the material. And what about that, Grishin? What about Volgograd?"

"The SS reached Boguchov near the Don, but that is still a hundred kilometers west of our positions at Kletskaya. Volkov tried to get a bridgehead there, but we stopped him."

"Will the SS get through?"

"Not in the short run. They stopped to consolidate, and will have to go 250 kilometers from the positions they are holding now to reach Volgograd. Zhukov does not think they can get there this winter. The road net along the southern bank of the Don is not good. Don't worry, all is not lost, even if we meet here now, and not in the Kremlin."

"We will fight on," said Kirov. "What is generally known of my condition?"

"The country at large knows nothing, though the rumor mills have

spread panic after Black Snow. Beria gave the order to start that before he even came to try and finish you off. In fact, that was what alerted me, and set me racing for the Red Archives, as I knew that order could not have come from you.”

“I wanted to stay and fight for Moscow,” said Kirov.

“And I would have stayed with you,” said Berzin. “As things stand now, I must tell you that I am not yet certain we have complete control. Most of the Armies on the front are still intact, and responding to orders from Zhukov and the General Staff. But the ministers and other government personnel fled the city when that fire started, and they are fairly well scattered. Some have reached Leningrad, but the NKVD has been causing trouble there as well. We have to take swift action, and I must tell you that I have ordered *Red Rain*.”

“Good,” said Kirov with a frown, which surprised Berzin, as he expected Kirov might protest that such measures were not yet required. “I have tried to govern fairly, and without the strong arm that Stalin might have used,” Kirov went on. “But if ever there was a time when a plan like that was needed, this is that hour. Stick it to them, Grishin. Find out who is loyal and who stands against us. And by god, make sure Volkov feels the pain. You have my permission to implement the full range of foreign reprisals.”

“It’s *Red Rain*, sir,” said Berzin. “There are no halfway measures in that plan. The niceties of diplomacy are over. Anyone who will not pledge loyalty to you and the existing government of the Soviet state, as we now constitute it in this room, is going to feel the bite of the storm. I activated my entire network yesterday, the full might and muscle of the GRU, and I mean all over the world.”

“Be careful with the Americans,” said Kirov. “We’ll need them.”

“Of course, sir. But I did want to question you about one man in particular—Vladimir Karpov. We were tracking his movements, but GRU North reports they’ve lost that ship.”

“Lost it?”

“Not one station on the northern coast has been able to get a sighting for over two weeks.”

“Could it have foundered in the ice?”

“Not likely. That airship fleet of his is still hovering about up there, but the ship seems to have vanished.”

Now Kirov nodded, seeming to Berzin’s careful eye to know more about that report than he would speak of just now. “Exclude the Siberian element in

Red Rain,” he said at last. “Send those agents to the Mongolian sector.”

“The Japanese?”

“Of course, Grishin. You know they’ll be after the American navy at Pearl Harbor. You know how those dominoes will fall. Hitler will foolishly declare war on the United States, and then we will have to declare war on the Japanese.”

“Yet we were neutral in the material,” said Berzin.

“You think the Siberians will remain neutral? I think not. That ship may have fallen off your surveillance net, but I have a strong feeling that it will turn up in the Pacific soon. That’s where it was headed, and that is where it will end up. As to Vladimir Karpov, he will not be targeted for now. I don’t think your men could get to him in any case. He’s on that ship, wherever it is.”

“Very well sir.”

“Grishin...”

“Sir?”

“Thank you—for saving my life, for standing with me as you did, when all hell must have been burning around you.”

“A man must choose where to stand many times in life,” said Berzin. “In my life, I have always been grateful, and honored, that my place has been here at your side.”

* * *

By the time Berzin’s GRU picked up the scent of the ship named for Sergei Kirov, it was December 2nd. *Red Rain* had fallen hard on their enemies in that interval, eliminating over 300 suspected rivals and enemy agents, smashing into the structure of the NKVD itself, rooting out Commissars and colonels and men like Beria’s henchman Molla, the man Orlov wanted to choke to death in one telling of these events.

Sergei Kirov’s wish that the streets of Moscow would become a Stalingrad was carried out. The Germans stayed in the city, holding onto the smoldering ruins they had conquered, where they still found some things left to burn for winter fires. Elsewhere on the front, the German advance began to slow in the frost of winter. Zhukov’s counterattacks played for time, until he could gather enough forces for the long anticipated winter counteroffensive. It would not be ready by December, but the Soviets still had enough troops

on the line to force a kind of winter stalemate. The Germans continued to try and eliminate the vast pocket they had bagged before Moscow, but it fought on for much longer than the Vyazma pocket survived.

All those operations were still underway when Karpov reappeared, grateful that he had not missed the attack at Pearl Harbor. Yet things were going to unfold in a much different manner this time around. Strange events were on the wind, quite literally, for the weather was going to change things, one of the many traitors to history that people often overlook. It's cold, heartless winds had already driven that fire through the streets of Moscow, as if conspiring with the German invaders at that crucial moment to lead them into the heart of the city they had struggled so long to conquer. And elsewhere, half a world away in the Pacific, another storm front was changing the careful timing of events as the Japanese planned to enter the war.

Yes, the sinister weather, along with the inclinations of a Crazy Cruiser Commander who wanted to try his hand at carrier operations on the way back to Pearl Harbor, were now about to begin rewriting history. One of the little Lost Lambs off Lady Lex had stumbled upon something north of Hawaii, and there were also three battleships out of the barnyard, their bows turning north now, when they might otherwise have been berthed and quietly sleeping in the harbor.

Far to the north, Vladimir Karpov was hastening through the last of the ice ridden Bering Strait when Nikolin picked up that fateful coded naval signal broadcast to all fleet units by the Japanese, "*Climb Mount Niitaka.*"

In recent months, the cold, treacherous winds of war had blown across the endless expanse of Russia to Moscow, and through the dry, forsaken deserts of North Africa. Now that storm front was breaking in the quiet dawn of December 7th, 1941, and it is there that our story must now return...

Part II

Day of Infamy

“There is heroism in crime as well as in virtue. Vice and infamy have their altars and their religion.”

— **William Hazlit**

Chapter 4

They fell from the sky like dark birds of prey. Flight after flight, one *Shotai* after another, their dark green wings painted with the red fireball of wrath. The Kates were swooping low, their bellies laden with the heavy water lances that would soon open the steel hulls of the enemy battleships. Above, the Vals plummeted down in their dive bombing runs, and beyond it all, the white winged Zeroes circled like hawks as they searched in vain for opposing enemy aircraft. Yet in spite of every warning, the surprise had been complete, and soon the Zeroes were off to other targets, some to the sleeping airfields at Hickam, Wheeler and Ford. There they came in low, guns blazing as they strafed the tightly packed planes on the concrete tarmacs.

Fuchida's jubilant signal, *Tora, Tora, Tora*, still echoed on the airwaves, as it would resound through the history of these tumultuous hours for decades to come. Some events were simply so weighty in their impact, with a gravitational pull on the stream of causality that doomed them to reoccur.

And this was one of them.

Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor had been all but pre-ordained when the Strike South Camp found itself largely unopposed in this retelling of events. For the Empire had already taken every province to the north of any value. Its troops garrisoned the long Trans-Siberian Rail as it wound its way up from Old Vladivostok, now called *Urajio* by the Japanese. Once it reached Khabarovsk, it then skirted the long bend of the Amur River, up and over until it reached Chita, a little over 200 miles from Lake Baikal. Those steel rails formed the Empire's northern border, and beyond the line, the endless stretches of tree sewn taiga held no interest for the Japanese. Even though there were vast reserves of oil and other resources there, Japan knew little about them, nor did it have the means of finding and developing those resources in that vast wilderness.

So instead, the eyes of the Generals and Admirals looked south, to the rubber plantations and proven oil fields of the Dutch Pacific Colonies, largely defenseless, like ripened fruit on a low hanging bough. The only caveat in taking them was the growing presence of the American military in the Philippines. All the sea lanes that would carry that oil and rubber back to Japan would have to transit waters within easy reach of US forces in the Philippines, and so war with the United States was deemed inevitable. The

American bases in the Philippines would have to be attacked, and the islands occupied, and if this were so, then the navy, largely through the voice of Admiral Yamamoto, strongly argued that the American navy must also be attacked, and if possible, destroyed.

The plan was worked out in exacting detail and rehearsed by the attack squadrons over many weeks of intensive training. As bold as it was risky, it would involve the cream of the Japanese carrier fleet, the *Kido Butai*, with the lion's share of the navy's best pilots. They would strike perhaps the strongest military bastion in the Pacific at that time, the massive combination of Army muscle and land based air power, and the hardened steel of America's Pacific Battleship squadrons all packed into the corner of one small island, Pearl Harbor. All of America's offensive war making power in the Pacific lay in that one place, quietly asleep on a balmy Sunday morning.

Off to the north, Admiral Nagumo sat in his Red Steel Castle, the carrier *Akagi*, flagship of the *Kido Butai*, and his thumping heart echoed the reports of exploding bombs and torpedoes as his first strike wave delivered its attack. His ship was the perfect example of the pivot in naval strategy that he would now so ably demonstrate. For *Akagi* was conceived as a fast battlecruiser of the *Amagi* class, in an era where battleships still reigned supreme. Now it had morphed into an aircraft carrier, the new queen of the seas insofar as many in the Navy were concerned.

Japanese ship naming conventions selected the towering strength of mountains to name their battleships, which was how *Akagi* began its career before its conversion. The ship now beneath Nagumo's feet had therefore been named for Mount Akagi, one of the three fabled "mountains of Jomo." That was the ancestral name of the province right there in the heart of the main island of Honshu, no more than 100 kilometers from Tokyo. Roughly translated, the ship's name was the "Red Castle."

Akagi had also seen many upgrades over the years, but strangely, her three tiered flight decks that had been revamped and overshadowed by one main upper deck in Fedorov's history, still remained. A small island superstructure had been added by 1938, on the port side to keep it clear from the vented steam and smoke of the downward facing stacks, which were on the starboard side of the ship. That tall island had been packed with long vertical bundles of sand bags to protect it from the shrapnel of war, two thick bands below the conning tower windows, and one row above. There stood Admiral Nagumo atop his Red Castle, surrounded by Lieutenants and

Commanders of every stripe.

An hour earlier, the ship had turned into the wind, and at that moment, with that single turn of the wheel, Japan as a nation had set her course for war that would lead her empire either to renewed glory, or to complete destruction.

“Now we climb our Mountain,” said Nagumo as he watched the planes taking off.

“May we find the lost treasure!” said his Fleet Air Officer, Masuda Shogo. He was referring to the legend associated with the rust iron red of the volcanic caldera on Mount Akagi, where it was said that the lost treasure of the Tokugawa Shogunate was secretly buried hundreds of years ago, and never found again. Those who have sought to discover it would have to first brave the icy cold winds that blew down the flanks of that mountain, the *Karakkaze*. That was what the pilots now called the bite of the wind when the carrier increased her speed and turned just before the planes would launch, the *Karakkaze*. Into that wind, Japan would now send the best trained naval aviation pilots in the world, and in some of the best combat planes designed to date.

The Aichi D3A1 *KanBaku* dive bomber the Allies called the “Val” was a relative newcomer, entering production just two years ago in December of 1939. With excellent range at almost 900 miles, it was a superb dive bomber, very stable in the near vertical dive it was capable of, which gave it lethal accuracy in the hands of a skilled pilot.

The Nakajima B5N2 *KanKo* Torpedo Bomber, known as the “Kate,” had a distinctive long windowed canopy for excellent visibility, good speed and exceptional range exceeding 1200 miles. It was superior to its American counterpart in every respect, for the lumbering Douglas TBD “Devastator” was a plane that too often failed to live up to its threatening name.

The Japanese plane was 100MPH faster, had a third more range, and carried the world’s premier aerial borne torpedo, the Type 91, with 800 kilograms of striking power and fabled reliability. By comparison the American Mark XIII was plagued with problems in 1941 and 1942, with many surface runners and duds weakening the striking power of the TBD squadrons. The US flyers would be lucky to get the torpedo to run true a third of the time, and then even luckier if they got a hit and it actually exploded.

The Japanese Type 91 had several unique features that made it so advanced for its day. First there were wooden tail fins added to the torpedo to

stabilize the airborne segment of its attack. They would be shed upon entry into the water, where a special PID controller system would take over to minimize roll in the sea. While the American plane had to come in low and slow, the Kate could race in at cruising speeds exceeding 200 MPH, much faster than the maximum speed of the American TBDs. For the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese had further modified the wooden fins to allow the torpedo to run in the shallow waters of the harbor instead of descending to 100 feet, as most torpedoes would do after hitting the water. The *Gyorai*, as they called it, the Thunderfish, were already tearing the bellies of the American battleships open when Nagumo got the urgent sighting report from Lieutenant Saburo Shindo's fighters off *Akagi*.

The men in those Japanese planes were as good as they came, many recruited at the age of 15 through the Japanese Yokaren program. Eager to find fresh young minds and bodies to mold and train, the Japanese staged formation flights over schools to arouse interest and stir the imagination of the young boys. Many times the pilots would even 'bomb' the school yards with small rubber balls attached to tiny parachutes, a gift to the young boys who stood in awe below. Recruitment followed soon after, and the one percent who made the grade entered a rigorous Spartan training regimen, grueling and very tough, where physical beatings would follow any lapse or failure, to harden the young boys into fighting men.

There at Tsuchiura on Lake Kasumigaura, the 'Misty Lagoon,' the discipline bordered on sadistic, and yet to the boys that made it that far, failure was unthinkable. If they were to be expelled from the training school, their family would be so dishonored that they might be forever ostracized. A discharge for poor performance was feared as the ultimate shame, but being human flesh and blood, for some that failure came in the form of suicide. Those who survived were as tough as hardened steel, and with skills to match the determination and willpower this rigorous training program had instilled in them.

Yet there was an artistry to their flying that was almost Zen like, for many had actually sat in long hours with Zen Monks and priests, who instilled in them the virtue of fighting with no mind. Their actions would then become instinctive, reflexive, without contamination by the discriminating consciousness. That was the Cherry blossom on the insignia inscribed on his left sleeve, and with it were the iron anchor of the navy and the wings he had labored so long and hard to earn.

The third plane to rise from those carriers was the Mitsubishi A6M *Reisen* “Zero,” a plane the Allies called the “Zeke.” It was a real shadow dancer in the skies, light, quick, and with whisper soft responsiveness at the flight controls that led many pilots who flew it to say it seemed as though the plane was a part of their own bodies. With the wings and fuselage built as one piece, the plane had strength and durability for the rigorous stresses of a dog fight in which it excelled. It could out range and out fight any Allied plane that opposed it in late 1941, hitting hard with two 20mm Type-99 cannons on the wings, and a pair of 7.7mm machineguns on the engine cowling.

Allied flyers who inspected one they had recovered from the Aleutians in 1942 would say that it was “built like a fine watch,” with a dash board that was a “marvel of simplicity,” and it was the scourge of the skies over the Pacific for many long months, until the Americans finally built planes like the Hellcat, P-38, and Mustang to match it.

One famous Zero pilot was the man who had planned the entire operation, Minoru Genda, and he had reveled in the skies with his white winged plane for months before the war, honing his skills to a fine and perfect art. One maneuver he devised to shake off an enemy fighter coming from behind became the famous *Hineri-Komi*, or “turning in.” It was a kind of pitch back maneuver, and it was refined to perfection by another Japanese Ace, Mochizuki Isamu. The plane would start a loop, and pitch over to one side at the top with a right rudder side slip followed by a hard left rudder that ended up putting the plane behind the attacking enemy. It was widely adopted and taught at the Yokosuka Naval Air School, becoming the bane of many an Allied pilot in those early months of the war.

So by the time these Japanese boy recruits had left the school yards behind to become men, and reached the decks of those carriers, they had hundreds of hours of flying experience behind them, uncompromising discipline, chiseled skill, and the planes to use every ounce of that ability. They had also formed a close knit comradery that was even tighter than traditional family circles. Only their fellow aviators knew just how hard it had been to get where they were, enduring deprivation, humiliation, endless physical hardships and beatings, the constant pressure to succeed, and fear of failure.

Admiral Nagumo’s flyers were truly an elite class, even as the war was just beginning, and many would stop and bow to the wall in the wardroom

where another onetime Captain of the Red Castle, one Isokoru Yamamoto, had ordered that the name of any flyer who ever died in action should be inscribed. It would take a wall full of those names, he had once told them, before they would ever reach the lofty heights their ship was named for, or before they would ever truly climb the mountain that was before them now.

“Order the planes from 5th Carrier Division to launch immediately, but they will assemble over the task force and await my order to move out.” Nagumo was listening to an urgent inner voice, something was itching at him, a thrumming sense of warning and alarm. He had earlier ordered those planes to be held back, but the thought that they would be sitting on the flight decks, armed and fueled, seemed too great a risk at that moment. If there were American carriers close by, he wanted to face them with a sword in hand.

His sixth sense was serving him well, for at that moment the planes of Bombing Six off the USS *Enterprise* were already in the air, and heading northwest to the point signaled by Ensign Teaff in plane 6S-2. They would soon be spotted by Lieutenant Saburo Shindo’s fighters, and the level of alarm now became a burning certainty in Nagumo’s mind. The enemy was there, and he already knew exactly where the Japanese carriers were. He knew that miles and miles ago, thought Nagumo, though he would never know how the careful stealth of his approach to this attack had been undone. Somehow the enemy had wind of his carriers, and he was coming in for the kill.

The orders flashed to *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* could not come soon enough, the fitful flag signals snapping in the stiff breeze with an almost frantic movement—*launch all ready aircraft!*

Chapter 5

Vice Admiral Bull Halsey was well named. He stood on thick short legs, which supported his barrel chested torso and well muscled arms. His big head sat at the top, with wild brows and the glint of mischief in his blue eyes that was often mistaken for anger. A no nonsense man, his disposition could flare that way on a moment's notice, but a wry grin would just as easily tug the corners of his heavy bulldog jaw. Under fire he would soon become cool and unperturbed, preferring to wear a broad white helmet on the weather bridge during any enemy attack, and personally watching the fall of every bomb that was directed at his ship as if he were evaluating the enemy pilot in a training drill.

But this was no drill... Even as the ship beat to quarters for its first official action of the Pacific War, Halsey was deep in thought, wondering whether he would be able to hurt the enemy he had just stumbled upon. Search Six had flashed the report, but only from a single plane. He could either get on the radio and ask Lieutenant Commander Hoppings to confirm the sighting, or he could take it as the war warning it was, and do something about it. Minutes later, when the news came that Pearl Harbor itself was already under attack, any shred of hesitation he may have had left him completely. He had already put the ship on its toes, and ordered Battleship Division 1 to get up north after that sighting.

Now he was sending Lieutenant Commander William Hollingsworth out with Bombing Six, 17 SBD-2 Dauntless dive bombers. Lieutenant Commander Eugene Lindsey's TBDs were still arming, but they would be up on deck soon. And he already had Wade McClusky up overhead with 16 Wildcats. It was going to be one hell of a morning, and the only question in his mind was how to coordinate his attack with Newman's task force, the man who had proposed this impromptu exercise that now saw his ship sitting right on the edge of the enemy attack on Pearl.

Captain Fredrick Sherman on the Lady Lex was about 75 miles northeast of his position, and would need time to get close enough to launch an attack if this sighting report was accurate. But Halsey knew that every minute counted now. If his ship was sighted by the enemy, McClusky's 16 Wildcats would be a fairly thin shield, and if he kept them all here on CAP, who was going to escort the strike wave in? He thought of Putman's 12

Marine Wildcats, delivered to Wake just 48 hours ago, and realized they would do a lot more good here on the *Enterprise* than they ever would on that island.

“Damn it,” he swore. “Where the hell is *Lexington*?”

Captain Murray had no answer for him, which did little for Halsey’s mood, but every instinct in the Admiral’s body was urging him to attack.

“Alright,” he said. “Notify Young that he can take in everything we have, including half McClusky’s fighters. That means we arm what’s left of Scouting Six.”

“That’ll be the ten SBDs, sir. Hopping took out the other eight.”

“Fine, get ‘em armed and off this ship heading northeast. We can’t wait for *Lexington*, but be damn sure they know where the bar is out there, and they’d better show up for the fight.”

He couldn’t be too hard on Newman and Sherman, for the *Lexington* was coming all the way from a position off Midway. In fact, had it not been for his suggestion concerning this exercise, the *Enterprise* would already be back at Pearl Harbor, and tight under the gun. So it was just good Joss that *Enterprise* was here, he thought. Halsey believed in luck, lived by it, and would always knock on wood whenever he made an overoptimistic prediction. Now he hoped his Joss was good that day, for from his perspective, the whole navy was counting on him now, and he was going to do everything possible to find a fight.

The strike group would become 27 SBDs now that Bombing Six had been augmented with the rest of those planes from Scouting Six. Along with the 18 TBD Devastators, and eight Wildcats in escort, Halsey would throw 53 planes at the Japanese that morning. They formed up at a little after 09:40 and were heading off into the brightening skies to look for that fight.

And they would soon find it.

* * *

Saburo Shindo was still up when they came, flights of dark blue planes against the pale sky. He had been the first to find and shoot down an American carrier based aircraft, for the planes Halsey had sent to Pearl in the old historical timeline never had that mission. Instead they were up in that strike wave, raw, untried pilots for the most part, yet feeling strength in numbers.... Until they saw what they were up against. Shindo and the two

other fighters from his *Shotai* off the *Akagi* were not alone.

The skies above the Japanese fleet were thick with swarms of aircraft. Many were the strike planes still taking off from the 5th Carrier Division, and they were already breaking away in small groups and heading south. Yet all the fighters, 15 Zeros off *Shokaku* led by Lt. Tadashi Kaneko, and another 15 off *Zuikaku* led by Lt. Masao Sato, joined the standing CAP assigned to the fleet, which amounted to 36 additional fighters, nine from each of the four remaining carriers. So the 45 American strike planes escorted by 8 Wildcats were now going to be facing 66 Zeros, and the result was a cold, unflinching mathematical carnage.

The brave Wildcats surged ahead to almost certain doom, while the 18 torpedo bombers broke off and dove for the deck. The dive bombers had to maintain altitude if they were ever to mount an attack, and of the 27 that flew out that day, 10 were killed outright, and another seven forced to break off and evade. *Shotai* after *Shotai* ripped through the formation, savaging the American planes like hawks streaking through a flight of lumbering geese. Planes were burning, trailing long smoky tails, and several exploded, careening down out of the sky in a mad cartwheel of death.

Others broke formation and maneuvered, pulling hard on the stick and yoke of their dive bombers, but no match for the nimble Japanese fighter planes. Yet the rear gunners were blazing away at any enemy plane that lined up for a kill, and some were scoring hits. Of the ten SBDs that managed to get over a target, six more were tailed by lethal Japanese fighter pilots, and gunned down as they braved that last final hour. Two pilots had been so rattled by the swirling air battle that they found themselves too low to get into the fight. They broke off and sped away, finding a bank of sea mist to hide them as they desperately headed home.

Saburo Shindo saw them briefly, noting their heading, and quickly radioed the strike planes to the south. An order had been given that if any clear sighting report emerged in the hours ahead, all 5th Carrier Division strike planes still carrying bombs and torpedoes were to break off from their approach, run to Pearl Harbor and look to find the American carriers at sea. Shindo's frantic call urged his comrades to follow the American dive bombers, and that was the only reason he decided to spare them, for they would have been easy kills, just as all the others were.

The American Wildcats fought their desperate defense, getting three kills, but losing five of eight planes, with the other three damaged and

looking to escape.

Down on the deck, the torpedo planes were struggling to line up on targets as the skies around them puffed up with dark deadly blossoms of fire and jet black smoke. The Zeroes came down after them, getting eight, and three more were so badly damaged by the enemy flak that they broke off, jettisoning their torpedoes and trying to find a way out of the death trap. Seven actually got torpedoes into the water, but four of those had launched much too soon, the planes being harried by the hot tracer rounds of enemy fire, and the jittery pilots wanting to just drop their fish and run for their lives. Those four had no chance to score a hit, but three brave men held on, one with the right wing of his plane on fire, painting the sky with a dark line of smoke that was aimed right at the carrier *Kaga*.

They all got off a clean shot, then banked away in a wild retreat, one with a bright winged Zero right on its tail. Two of the three torpedoes ran true, but one soon bobbed up to the surface where it was easily spotted in time for Captain Jisaku Okada to make a ten point turn to avoid the attack. *Kaga* turned, but her 42,000 ton displacement responded sluggishly. Okada could see that he would avoid the first torpedo, but there were two, and the second could not be evaded. He clenched his jaw, about to endure the shame of being the first sea Captain in the Japanese Navy to be struck by the enemy, but that fate was reserved for another that day. The last torpedo would have struck home had its engine not failed, sending it diving into the depths to be forever forgotten.

Thus far, the American attack had been a terrible disaster, but there were still those last two SBDs who had kept on in their dive when the other two broke off, the last of the Mohegans from Bombing Six—and they were right over the Red Castle. Down came the bombs, a pair of 500 pounders delivered by two intrepid American pilots—Ensign G. H. Goldsmith and Lieutenant John Van Buren. Their Joss was very good that day, and Van Buren put his bomb right on the nose of the unwieldy carrier, where it would strike the low bow flight deck and explode. Goldsmith's bomb just skirted the starboard side funnel where it blew away part of the cowlings on the steam vent and shotgunned shrapnel into the guts of the ship, killing fifteen sailors.

To the angry Japanese fighter pilots above, they looked in horror to see *Akagi*, the fleet flagship, had been hit twice, bleeding dark black smoke like a harpooned whale.

The Red Castle was on fire.

* * *

In the ninety minutes it took the planes of *Enterprise* to launch, assemble, reach their presumed target and die, the *Lexington* had trimmed 45 miles off the range and was already spotting planes on her long deck for takeoff. The crazy cruiser skipper who had wanted his chance as a carrier commander was about to get his wish come true in a way he never expected. But in many ways, the *Lexington* was even more ill equipped than *Enterprise* was for this fight.

The ship had just delivered 18 old Marine Vindicator dive bombers to Midway, clearing her decks for the action that was now underway. Lady Lex could send up 18 SBD-2 dive bombers in Bombing Two, and an equal number from Search Two. Behind them there would be only 12 TBD-1 torpedo planes, all watched over by 17 obsolete F2A-3 Brewster Buffalos. Ten would fly escort, leaving only seven left for CAP, and one of those failed to make it off the deck that morning due to engine problems.

Lieutenant Commander Jim Thatch and his wingman Ensign Eddy Sellstrom were in two of those Buffalos, the last planes off the deck that day. Historically, they would have to wait until February 20 before they trained their guns on an enemy plane, a Japanese Type 97 flying boat near Rabaul. This time their baptism by fire would come much sooner. They were up with Lt. Stanley and Ensign Haynes, and Lieutenants Butch O'Hare and Marion Dufilho were the last two in the CAP formation.

Those six men were *Lexington's* shield, in six lumbering planes that had been very well named when they were dubbed Buffalos. They were so heavy that when the British received them, they ended up cutting the loads of ammo and fuel, and replacing the guns in a vain attempt to get more performance out of the plane. In the end they made trainers of the few they received, for the Buffalo was simply outclassed in every respect by their own fighters. A few surplus planes delivered to Finland were derisively called "flying beer bottles," though the planes still bested the older Russian fighters they faced. In the Pacific, they could not even match the early Japanese A5M Claude, let alone the acrobatic Zeroes they might soon encounter in this desperate hour. The plane was almost as fast as a Zero at 320MPH, but the Japanese plane was far more maneuverable. The stubby fuselage of the buffalo would soon come to be called the "flying coffin" by Marine pilots, and it was a very

fitting rebuke.

The strike wing started on its way after receiving a better report on the enemy location. It was going to be a very long run for the TBDs, for the action was almost beyond their 'point of no return' for the Devastator, which had a fairly short strike radius. Down on the flight deck before takeoff, Ensign Chuck Hamilton was fresh from the strike briefing room, his cheeks red in the morning wind.

"Did I hear that right?" he said to a mate, Lieutenant Ed Hurst. "They said the Japs were spotted 175 miles out."

"You heard it right," said Hurst as he started to climb up the wing of his plane.

"But sir, those torpedo planes have a combat radius of only 200 miles, if even that. How are they supposed to get home?"

Hurst gave him a look, rubbed his nose. "Now you're starting to sound like Walkie Talkie," he said, referring to a squadron mate who always seemed to be talking aloud to himself on the hanger deck, Gunner Talkington. "Don't you think the Brass know that? They'll move the damn ship after we take off, that's all. Besides, if the Torpies can't do the job, we will. Now get in your goddamned plane."

All told, *Lexington* was going to send out 58 more planes to look for the Japanese, and they had a fairly good idea how to find them. On the way in, they could hear the action then underway as the *Enterprise* group ran into the buzz saw of those enemy Zeroes on CAP defense. More than one man swallowed hard as they heard the frantic calls of their comrades, some yelling for their mates to turn, others to bail out when their planes were scorched with fire. They had been told they were going up against five or six enemy carriers, yet the futility of what they were now doing never entered the minds of the pilots. They kept on, steady on the stick, though a good number prayed, while others silently said their inner goodbyes to loved ones they left behind in the states.

Yet now fate would play a cruel game. When the planes of Carrier Division 5 responded to the urging of Saburo Shindo, they eventually spotted those two wayward US planes and started following them. But the American pilots had their return heading wrong, and instead of leading the enemy back to the *Enterprise*, they had turned 15 degrees to starboard and they were now leading them directly back to *Lexington*.

The Japanese had 27 B5N Kates off *Shokaku*, all expecting to launch

their torpedoes at the battleships in Pearl Harbor, and all equipped with torpedoes designed to run shallow. The Kates off *Zuikaku* were too far along and had been sent on to Pearl, but the dive bombers off that carrier turned back and joined those of *Shokaku* to put a total of 54 Vals in the Japanese strike wave. These, combined with 12 Zeroes on escort, would send a total of 93 planes out in the hunt for the American carriers, and while it was *Enterprise* that had picked this fight and thrown the first punch, they were all going to find Lady Lex instead.

Those six Brewster Buffalos over Newton's Task Group would each be double teamed by a pair of escorting Zeroes, and the remaining 81 strike planes looked down to see the *Lexington*, escorted by the heavy cruisers *Chicago*, *Portland* and *Astoria*, with five destroyers.

Again, the results were coldly mathematical, though the Japanese torpedo bombers would find the wooden fins rigged to their lances had them running much too shallow in the rising swells, and many well aimed torpedoes would run astray on the open sea. That said, they were going to put three of those 27 torpedoes into *Lexington*, and one would get through the torpedo protection system and strike a reservoir of stored Avgas. The resulting explosion rocked the ship violently to starboard, and for a moment it looked as though the weight of that prominent superstructure would pull it all the way over. But *Lexington* righted herself, though she was soon listing heavily to port where that hit had been taken.

Another two torpedoes found her closest defender, the cruiser *Astoria*, and that ship would not survive. The Vals would do a little better, scoring five bomb hits that savaged the flight deck of *Lexington*, and a sixth that struck flush on the wide stack, blasting it open and sending a pall of heavy smoke over the entire scene. *Astoria* would also take two hits, with two on *Chicago* and one on *Portland*, and the destroyer *Flusser* was blown completely out of the water when a 500 pound bomb struck and ignited a torpedo rack, but the other four destroyers raced about to avoid harm.

Not long after their home carrier was mortally wounded, the planes off *Lexington* found what they were looking for...

Chapter 6

Aboard *Lexington*, the situation was going from bad to worse. A 500 pound bomb had exploded just forward of the center elevator, opening a hole twelve feet wide and penetrating to the hangar deck where it caused a great deal of fragment damage. Another bomb had fallen just inboard of the main island, apparently without detonating, but it was a delayed action bomb, and when it reached the 2nd deck a hapless seaman stared in horror as the spinning fuse activator suddenly stopped.

It was the last thing he saw. Another bomb had just missed the stern of the ship, but had enough explosive power to start fires on the fantail and temporarily interfere with the ship's steering when the rudder was batted to one side by the force of the detonation. Yet the most telling blow fell right on the forward elevator, punching through to deck three where it ignited to send smoke and fire into all the hanger deck spaces in that area.

Even taken together, the ship might have recovered from this damage, but not with the serious torpedo hits thrown in on the port side, and the heavy fires below decks there when that Avgas blew. *Lexington* was soon in a heavy list, and Admiral Newton's experience as a carrier commander was coming to an most unfortunate end. He could see that the situation was now beyond saving, and gave the order to abandon ship. Signals flashed to the four remaining destroyers in his screen to make ready to recover survivors in the water. As to where his planes would land when they returned, he ordered his senior flight operations officer to notify the strike leader they had to either look for the *Enterprise* or somehow make it to any land base they might find.

When that news reached the planes in flight, Ensign Chuck Hamilton swore under his breath. They had not even seen the enemy yet and the damn Japs had already put the hurts on Lady Lex. This mission had been a long shot from the beginning, with the presumed targets right at, or beyond the edge of the point of no return, at least for the torpedo bombers. He had a little more range in his Dauntless, but Hurst had told him they were going to move the damn ship, and that was not going to happen. Now they had to look for the *Enterprise*, and he had absolutely no idea where that ship might be. With a sinking feeling he tightened his grip on the stick, saying nothing to his machine gunner in the back. He knew in his bones he was probably never going to lay eyes on the *Enterprise*, and getting over to Oahu would be just as

difficult.

Angry that the war was starting off so badly for the ship and his mates, he swore he'd make this run a way to get even. Seconds later, he heard the strike leader shout out a warning: *Enemy Carriers! Three O'clock!* He and the rest of Bombing Two were about to get their day in the fire.

* * *

Down on the long flight deck of the carrier *Kaga*, standing just aft of the command island, Air Commander Sata Naohito looked in horror at the dark cloud mushrooming up from the fleet flagship. *Kaga* had been steaming abreast of *Akagi*, and had only now turned away when Captain Okada had maneuvered to avoid those torpedoes, which gave Naohito an excellent view of the other ship after the turn. He had clearly seen the first hit on the short forward deck, and his initial thought had been that it was fortunate *Akagi* had not completed her planned refit to extend the main top flight deck all the way to the bow. Now *Akagi* was only using that lower bow deck to launch and recover her small detachment of sea planes, which were then stored on a much smaller middle deck just below the main deck. That hit was clearly going to prevent any further launch or recovery of a seaplane, but it should not interfere with the carrier's main flight deck operations.

We were lucky to avoid those torpedoes, he thought, and if *Akagi* had to suffer this insult, the ship was also lucky to be hit where it was, right on the nose. The American pilots were brave, but unskilled. Their minds were on the flack being thrown at them by our 5-inch batteries, and not on the weapons they hoped to strike us with. That is always a fatal distraction at the moment of attack. A good pilot must lose all sense of self in that moment. He must become nothing more than a part of his aircraft, a simple machine of death, with not the slightest inkling of his own fate coming to mind. They should not have even come this close.

He watched as a Zero chased down the last of the torpedo bombers that had made that threatening run on the *Kaga*, gunning it down with bright fire from the white wings. He could not see what the other bomb had done to *Akagi*, but from the looks of things, the heavy smoke told him the ventilation stacks on the side of the carrier had been hit. That would be a nuisance, the smoke obscuring flight deck operations, but it was also not a serious blow. For a moment he thought he saw the hot orange tongues of a fire starting on the bow of the other ship, and the smoke there became heavier. That was

most likely the fuel from one of the ready seaplanes on that deck, he thought. Most unfortunate, particularly for the pilot who was waiting in that cockpit.

Yet now his attention was suddenly pulled skyward again, and he could hear shouts from other watchmen on the island above, see their stiff arms pointing. He looked to see the sky darkening with tiny black specks, and he could just hear the drone of their engines. An air duel began there as he watched, where two *Shotai* that had been on high overwatch now dived to engage the enemy planes, but the bulk of the CAP had been scattered in its pursuit of the first American strike, and many planes had dived to low elevation to attack those enemy torpedo planes.

With a sudden pulse of anxiety, he realized that all these planes could not be coming from a single American carrier. There had to be at least two, and possibly even three. For the first time the sense of imminent danger settled on him, though he took a deep breath, looking now to the elevators where he could see the last three Zeroes remaining in reserve were now being brought up to be spotted for launch. Soon the planes from the first strike wave should be returning, and Captain Okada would have to run with the wind for recovery. Behind him, he could see a few planes on the decks of *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, but with the second wave already launched to attack Pearl Harbor, the fleet was in an interval of calm where flight deck operations were concerned.

That moment of breathless calm was now about to end.

* * *

Ensign Hamilton saw the carriers ahead, heard the chatter of the Buffalo pilots as they struggled to engage the first enemy fighters coming down from above. But there were not many, and he and his mates were able to close on the targets relatively quickly. He saw the torpedo planes descending to make their runs, and there he could see many more enemy fighters swarming low over the sea, and starting to climb. He looked ahead, saw the smoke from the lead carrier, and realized the *Enterprise* strike group must have already attacked. They had come on the scene like a column of cavalry reinforcements at a beleaguered post, and now he was going to give it to the enemy for what they had done to Lady Lex.

Hurst was in his ear... "*Steady boys, let's get that stray sheep first!*" The ensign could see what his flight leader meant, for one of the enemy

carriers had swung out of the formation and was now turning to resume station. A minute later they were right on top, and he tipped his wings over, following two other planes down after Hurst to begin his dive. For the first time in the war, he heard one of his mates shout out a battle cry on the radio as they dove, a word that was once imbued with a sinister hidden meaning... *Geronimo!*

Hamilton dove, still in love with his big heavy plane, and feeling the weight and solidity of the Dauntless SB2. It had a rugged feel that reassured, and yet it still handled as well in a dive as it might in level flight. The innovative diving brake at the trailing edge of the wing allowed the plane to make very good high angle dives, with great stability that led to very accurate bombing. It wasn't as maneuverable as the quick turning Japanese Vals, but it could carry a better bomb load, take much more punishment, and was just as accurate in the hands of a decent pilot. Ensign Hamilton was pretty good, and today he was well motivated.

The stray sheep he was diving on was the *Kaga*, now well away from the main formation of enemy carriers. Lieutenant Hurst knew that they would likely face a good deal less flak to go after that ship, for the rest of the formation presented a phalanx of defense, with the skies already beginning to puff up as one of the other squadrons decided to try their luck against the main body.

The enemy had seen them approaching, and though the fighters had not come up yet to challenge, the flak was pocking up the sky all around them. *Kaga's* main weapon for a high elevation attack was her sixteen 5-inch dual purpose guns, eight on each side of the ship. They could outrange the 25mm auto cannons, but getting a hit wasn't going to be easy as the fast moving dive bombers came in.

He watched as the airspeed slowly increased, moving through 260 to 280 knots. The enemy ship appeared under the cowl of the plane, and he could see he was lined up well. He nudged the nose just a little to the right, reduced his throttle a bit, and set his props. Coming down from the higher altitude required him to adjust the gas mixture slightly as the plane descended. His eyes ran quickly over his instrument panel, checking the carburetor heat, and noting the indicators telling him the safety was off and his bomb was ready to release. He took a quick look over his shoulder to check his rear seat gunner, seeing he was in position for the dive, then leaned forward to put his eye to the bombing telescope. The plane passed through

11,000 feet, and at 10,000 he pushed it over for the final vertical segment of the dive.

Hamilton set his goggles firmly in place, opened the dive brakes to trim his speed, and looked for his target. The chill of the air at cruising altitude was now gone, and he could feel the muggy warmth of the Pacific beneath him.

He had a 500 pounder underneath, and a pair of 100 pound bombs on the wings. As he dove, through 8000 feet to 6000 feet, he could hear Gunner Talkington yammering to himself on the radio as always, which brought a smile. Then he squinted to be sure he had his target in the crosshairs, and hit his bomb release. 700 pounds fell away, lightening the plane, and the Ensign pushed himself back in the seat, his stomach muscles tight, yelling at the top of his voice like all the others when they let that payload go. It was one more way to keep the blood in your head when you pulled out of that dive—yell for all you were worth. He didn't want to black out, even for a moment on his first real combat dive, so he stayed focused, breathing hard as he closed those dive flaps to pick up speed and make good his escape from the bright flashing fire of the Japanese 25mm guns that had now joined the battle at lower elevation. He wanted to see his enemy beneath him when he pulled up, inwardly crossing his fingers that his aim had been true.

It was a strange feeling coming in like that, the noise of the plane, the sharp crack of the flak guns, the fitful calls on the radio, and the sensation of terrible speed, as if you were strapped on a meteor plummeting down through the sky. He had been lined up well, the plane very stable when he pulled to release those bombs, and now he had every expectation for a hit. He heard Talkington's shrill voice yelling and knew the other man had just released his eggs too. But Walkie Talkie's voice was suddenly cut off, and Hamilton turned his head to look for his mate.

The plane had been hit. A 5-inch shell exploded right in front of the Dauntless, the shrapnel shattering Talkington's wind screen and taking him in the left shoulder with a severe wound. Other fragments had scored his wings, and these early versions of the plane did not have self-sealing fuel tanks. The resulting fire was going to end his mate's dive the hard way, and that was his war, over before it started. He wasn't going to have to worry about trying to find the *Enterprise*, thought Hamilton grimly. The only place he was ever going to land that plane was in the deep blue sea.

* * *

As the attack came in, Air Commander Sata Naohito ran for his station on the aft quarter of the island, a very small platform, just above the flight deck, and beneath the Type 91 AA fire director that was trying to feed the 5-inch guns the best firing angle to engage the planes. It had done well enough against Walkie Talkie's plane, but not before he had released his bombs, which were now falling with very good accuracy. Naohito saw them coming, specks in the sky at first, yet growing ever larger, as though the heavens had hurled them directly at his station, and with deadly precision.

Down they came, the 500 pounder just barely missing the flight deck, while one of the smaller 100 pound bombs struck and exploded directly beneath his station. He had just stepped up onto the circular stairway around that fire director when the shrapnel took his legs from under him. Some struck the windows of the bridge itself, fifteen feet above, and the glass shattered from that impact. As he fell with the pain, Naohito felt the cold spray from that 500 pounder that had narrowly missed the ship, and could see white spumes of other bomb splashes bracketing the carrier. Then he felt a larger impact, and knew they had taken a direct hit with a heavy bomb. Hamilton's aim had been dead on, and he was getting his payback for Lady Lex, for Pearl, and for old Walkie Talkie all in one. In that ten minute slice of the war, both ships in Carrier Division 1 had been hit and were now on fire.

Commander Naohito might have bled to death then and there, were it not for the fact that some of that shrapnel had also struck the Type 91 director, and gunnery officer Lieutenant Commander Miyano Toyosaburo had come out from the bridge to inspect for damage. He saw Naohito slumped on the winding stair, and immediately ordered men to his aid. Talkington's hit, even with that much smaller bomb, had done just enough damage to put that director out of action, and though he did not know it, he had helped the next squadron get through that flak defense to press home the attack.

Though this was their first real combat experience, and they were up against very steep odds, the American pilots in their sturdy Dauntless planes were going to wreak havoc. Hamilton's 500 pound bomb went right through the main flight deck, shaking the ship violently when it exploded to immolate the hanger deck spaces below. Though they were mostly empty of planes now, there were fuel canisters, hoses, tools, winches, and a rack of ordnance

for the dive bombers was still at the ready. A fire started, and Japanese fire control on the carriers was going to prove for the first time here that it was not up to the task.

On the bridge above, Captain Jisaku Okada felt the concussion of the hit, and the intense vibration under his feet. First hit, second hit, it did not matter. His face burned with shame as he rushed to the shattered window to see what had happened. The dark black smoke was pouring from the center of his flight deck, where a slight elevation created a small bulge. He could see the hot wavering flames there, and the only consolation he could take was the fact that almost every plane on the ship was already in the sky. Even those last three zeroes that had been spotted managed to get off the deck just before the American dive bombers came in, and now they were savagely attacking the ship's tormenters.

But how will I recover my planes if that fire is not soon controlled, he thought? Thankfully, there are many other decks free of harm, and no danger to the pilots should they return soon.

But the shame of being struck here was bad enough, let alone the thought that his planes might now have to land elsewhere, and he might have to return home without an air wing. He turned to a young Lieutenant, ordering him below to get a first hand report on the damage. Trying to sort out what was being shouted over the voice tubes was useless.

Another bomb landed very near the forward port side of the ship, and then *Kaga* rocked yet again as it was struck heavily near the bow. This time it blew away one of the big support girders there, causing the entire edge and corner of the flight deck supports to crumple and collapse right before Captain Okada's unbelieving eyes. It looked as though the ship had struck something in the water, with the bow segment of the long flight deck rutted and bent. He did not think the damage was severe enough to inhibit landing operations, but the hit amidships had already decided that fate, and the sudden secondary explosion that now shook the Captain from his feet would decide the fate of the ship itself.

Hamilton's hit was now greatly compounded. The fire amidships had reached the ordinance rack, and three more 500 pound bombs that had not been properly stored went off one after another. The resulting explosion blew a massive 40 foot hole in the main deck, while also blasting deeper into the ship where it cut numerous steam pipes from the engines in the boiler spaces.

When Okada pulled himself to his feet, he saw the jet black smoke laced

with hot white steam, and knew at once what had happened. There, through all that smoke and steam, he could dimly see the blood red circle of the *hinomaru* painted on the bow segment of the flight deck, Japan's famous rising sun that would soon become an aiming point for industrious American pilots in the years ahead.

The symbolism of that insignia was rooted deep in Japanese culture, for the Emperor himself was said to be a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, his authority thereby springing from divine origins. Seeing that emblem shrouded over by the choking black smoke and vented steam that was the life blood of his ship, was a great blow to Captain Okada, and he never forgot the ominous feeling he experienced at that moment.

Part III

Ultimatum

“We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not a compromise but an ultimatum.”

— **Aiden Wilson Tozer**

Chapter 7

Admiral Nagumo saw the explosion plume up from the center of his sister ship, and his eyes tightened. There was a collective groan from many of the younger officers, but Nagumo said nothing, standing stone still on the bridge. It was then that a damage control officer rushed in to report the hit to the lower forward deck of his own ship had been managed, and the fires were under control.

“We are still fully operational,” the young officer said hopefully, then he stopped and gaped out the window at *Kaga*, the intake of his breath a sharp punctuation to his optimistic report.

At that moment, all the fears and reservations Admiral Nagumo had harbored concerning this mission were made a real and tangible thing in the sight of *Kaga* burning off his starboard side. The enemy planes were still attacking, torpedo bombers swooping down and leveling off to make runs on Carrier Division 2 in the center of his formation. He could already see that *Hiryu* and *Soryu* were beginning to turn away to port, knowing there must be torpedoes in the water.

He also realized that in spite of the awesome spectacle of his powerful *Kido Butai*, it now seemed as fragile as a lotus blossom. Throw a handful of planes at it, for that was the sum of all that got in close enough to attack his sister ship, and look what could happen. They had been nearly two years planning, working out every conceivable detail of the operation. His squadron pilots had been all assigned to specific berths and targets. Genda had worked out the details to the letter, and the men had rehearsed it all for many months. The long cross Pacific approach had been conducted with perfect secrecy, save one lonesome Russian steamer that they had seen on their far horizon, which they allowed to pass unharmed. Everything had been working flawlessly, and the reports coming back from the first wave strike on Pearl Harbor had been ticking off the hits like a grandfather clock tolling midnight.

The names of the enemy battleships had been memorized by his pilots, and now the wardroom aide had been carefully painting the dark silhouettes for every hit obtained, his brush tipped in blood red paint. His enemy was feeling the power of the *Kido Butai*, *California*, *Tennessee*, *West Virginia*, all striped red with numerous bomb and torpedo hits, and doomed to sink.

Maryland had been screened off from torpedo attack by the *Vestal*, but it had already taken three bomb hits from his skilled Val dive bombers, along with two more on *Pennsylvania*. On the other side of Ford Island, the battleship *Utah*, now only a target ship, had taken three torpedo hits and two more bomb hits. The Americans were going to have to fire at some other ship, for *Utah* would also sink, along with the heavy cruiser *Detroit*, with the *Raleigh* also damaged but still afloat.

Yet in spite of the heavy toll he had inflicted on his enemy, all Nagumo could see was the *Kaga*, the one thing that had gone wrong, and the only thing that seemed to matter to him now. *Kaga* was burning, clearly out of action, and now her speed was falling off considerably with the loss of steam to her engines. The time for gawking at the display was over, and he turned to give orders, his eyes hard on his Fleet Air Officer, Masuda Shogo.

“Signal the destroyers to render assistance to *Kaga*,” he said slowly. “The *Kido Butai* will now make a ten point turn to come around on the course taken by Carrier Division Two.”

They were not turning their backs on *Kaga* just yet, but they were certainly looking away. Nagumo knew the smoke from that fire would be seen for a hundred miles, and he wanted to get his fleet as far from this place in the sea as possible. Considering the stricken carrier’s loss of speed, he knew it could no longer run with the others. The destroyers would help provide good flak coverage, and if it became necessary to abandon the ship, they would be ready to take on survivors, and help her commit *seppuku* with their torpedoes.

One look at this second enemy attack had also confirmed the assumption made by many others when they saw it coming. There were now at least two enemy carriers nearby, and possibly more. They believed three were here, in the Pacific, and now he found himself wondering how the enemy could have discovered them so quickly.

I have struck a very hard blow, he thought, but the tip of my sword has already shattered. It is my duty to return this fleet intact, for this war is only just beginning. At the same time, here is the opportunity before us to find and destroy those enemy carriers as well. But at what further cost to me? This very ship has already sustained a hit. Yes, the damage was controlled, and we have lost little more than our pride in being the first ship struck by the enemy, yet fate would decree this, would she not? This is the Red Castle, the flagship of the *Kido Butai*. I have little doubt that *Kaga* has taken a blow that was

meant for me, but we will all feel it now, each and every one of us.

News came on a runner that the dark enemy on his horizon had been found. Fleet Air Officer, Masuda Shogo, reported that an enemy carrier had been spotted and attacked, and that it was seen to be badly burning as the strike planes retired. They had traded *Kaga* for at least one American carrier, and still enjoyed the tremendous advantage of odds here. Yet at that moment he was powerless. All his planes were already in the sky, and soon to be looking for friendly decks to land, their fuel tanks low, guns running empty after the long morning battle. A minute later Commander Shogo reported Fuchida was returning with the bulk of all the first wave strike planes. Now he had to recover them, each and every one, and it would take a good deal of time before he could spot new planes for offensive operations.

What would come out of the skies in that interval? He had seen at least a hundred enemy planes in this attack. Was there a third carrier out there launching on his position even now?

“Sir,” came the senior officer of the watch. “Commander Fuchida reports enemy ships are approaching from the south! Three battleships!”

Nagumo whirled around, his face taut, eyes narrow. “Battleships?” There, it had finally come, the answer to yet another question that had been gnawing at the back of his mind. There were three dark silhouettes on the placards unblemished by the ward aid’s red paint. He looked at the tally, noting their names, *Arizona*, *Oklahoma*, *Nevada*. There could be no doubt as to why those ships had weathered the first strike unscathed—they were not in the harbor. They must have been far to the south and east when Fuchida led the first wave in, yet they have been laboring all morning to find us here, and now they come when I haven’t a single armed plane to throw at them.

“Sir, Admiral Mikawa with Battleship Division 3 asks permission to close and engage the enemy.”

Vice Admiral Gunichi Mikawa had planted his flag aboard the battleship *Kirishima* for this sortie, a most capable man, former Chief of Staff of the 2nd Fleet, and an Admiral on Navy General Staff and with Imperial Headquarters. Nagumo could not deny him this hour, though every instinct in his body was warning him to turn now, use speed instead of steel, and to disengage.

“The *Kido Butai* will assume a course heading of 310 for aircraft recovery,” he ordered. “The screening force will engage the enemy task force and cover recovery operations involving the *Kaga* while we do so. All first

wave planes will rearm and prepare for launch as soon as possible.”

“Then we will launch the third wave as planned?” asked Masuda Shogo, the light of battle in his dark eyes.

“There will be no third wave at Pearl Harbor,” said Nagumo. “All planes will rearm for naval strike operations.”

His Air Commander hesitated, the loss of the long advocated third strike a blow, but he immediately knew the reason for Nagumo’s decision was sound. There was blood in the water here. The enemy carriers had found them and struck hard, and now they had battleships on their far horizon to the south. Nowhere, not in any of their planning scenarios, had the prospect of encountering enemy battleships at sea been seriously considered. The American ships were old and slow, just like *Mutsu* and *Nagato* back home. That was why Battleship Division 3 had been selected for this mission, as the *Kongo* Class ships that filled its ranks had originally been conceived as fast battlecruisers, though only two such ships were present in the screening force, *Kirishima* and *Hiei*.

Now a strange calculus entered his mind, and with it came a shaking realization of what was actually happening at that moment. The two Japanese battleships carried eight 14-inch guns each, but they would be opposed by twelve 14-inch guns on the *Arizona*, ten on the *Nevada*, and then another ten on the *Oklahoma*. The Americans would have a decided advantage, with 32 big guns against only 16 for Mikawa’s force. Nagumo knew it was unlikely those ships were steaming alone. There would be cruisers and destroyers in that enemy task force as well. How could it have been missed? The frenzy of the unexpected carrier attack had overshadowed all else.

Now the fleet was facing a strong enemy surface action group, with *Kaga* out there like a wounded bison, and unable to stay in the herd. And here they were with no planes ready to strike these unexpected American battleships. Now he realized Nagumo’s turn to the north, so quietly veiled as instructions to recover and re-arm for further operations, was actually a forced disengagement. The Admiral was preparing to retire, or at the very least he was laboring now to get his carriers as far from those battleships as possible.

He gave Nagumo one look that indicated he understood everything in his superior officer’s mind, and then went off, sharply issuing the orders that had been given. Nagumo turned again to look at *Kaga*, his lips tight, cheeks taut. He had no choice, he thought. He had to leave his sister ship behind....

A single 500 pound bomb, flown and delivered on a single SBD-2 Dauntless, by a singularly motivated pilot who had lost all worries about finding his way home, had now changed everything.

* * *

It was a lonesome feeling when the first planes eventually made it back to *Enterprise*. Halsey was out on the weather bridge watching them come, thinking the main body had to be right behind these early arrivals. Two planes looked like they still had their bombs in place, and he made a mental note to go see the pilots and ask them why... until he saw the planes first after they landed. The damage from enemy machine gun and flak was plain to see. One SBD even had the canopy shattered, the pilot flying in the open air the whole way home, and damage to wings, tail fins and engine cowlings was visible even from his perch above the flight deck. Eleven SBDs made it back, along with three Wildcats and six TBDs. That was all that was left of his wing, just 20 of 53 planes that he had launched only two hours ago.

To make matters worse, he had already received word of the fate of the *Lexington*. Newton had abandoned ship, moving his flag to the heavy cruiser *Portland*, which was also hit, but had managed to control the fires. *Chicago* had it a little worse, and was still fighting fires amidships. *Astoria* was gone, along with destroyer *Flusser*, and the remaining four destroyers in TF 12, *Porter*, *Drayton*, *Lamson* and *Mayhan*, were circling the stricken carrier trying to get as many men off the lifeboats and out of the water as possible.

On top of all this, the news came back from Pearl with reports on the heavy damage there. Captain Murray was at his side now, seeing that grim bulldog look on Halsey's face, only now he seemed a dog without a bone.

"We got hit real hard today," said Murray.

"Don't I know it," said Halsey. He was thinking of the men lost now, not the ships. They could, and would, build more ships, but the men could never be really replaced. Fresh faced recruits would soon flood every branch of the service as the startling news of the Pearl Harbor attack rippled across the country. Yet it was all standing force that was lost today, the ships, planes, and men who had been in navy blue and khaki in the years before the war, and Halsey was silently counting the men.

There were over 2500 out there on the *Lexington* alone, and now he had word from Van Valkenburgh that his heavy division had sighted the enemy

and was preparing to engage. There were another thousand men on each of those battleships, hundreds more on the escort ships. Now he was considering the wisdom of so boldly ordering them north to attack, as was Murray, though he said nothing to Halsey about it at a moment like this.

“What about the boys off *Lexington*?” said Murray. “They’ll be running on fumes in another twenty minutes.”

“Word is they’re inbound now, and god help them,” said Halsey. “I didn’t know where we’d put the damn planes, until I saw what was left of our own air wing.”

A straggler from the *Enterprise* group had run into trouble, dived to evade a pursuing enemy fighter, eventually losing it in low clouds. The delay had been very fortunate. By the time he climbed to a cruising altitude, he spotted a flight of planes and heard some loose chatter on the radio that told them they were friendly. It was a group of planes off the *Lexington*, and they were more than eager to follow him home.

“They hit us at Guam,” said Murray. “No doubt Wake and Midway will be next. At least those planes we delivered were there in the nick of time, but we haven’t heard anything else for a while. MacArthur ought to be on his toes in the Philippines.”

“Mountbatten warned me about this,” said Halsey, with a strange edge in his tone. “Remember when we entertained his highness here aboard the *Enterprise*? He took part in that little destroyer attack exercise when we transferred him to the *Balch*. Well after that, he told me he was appalled by the poor state of readiness at Pearl. Said the Japanese had a history of starting things by launching surprise attacks, and Pearl Harbor looked like ripe fruit. Well, he was right, wasn’t he.”

“Admiral... Do you think the Brits knew about this in advance?”

“If they did, they might have made their warning just a little more official, but that hardly matters now.”

The real scope of what was happening descended on Halsey like a dark cloud. They had been receiving war warnings for months, whispered intelligence, signals that had been decoded, oddities in the behaviors and schedules of Japanese diplomats in embassies all over the Pacific. Now the storm had finally broken, a raging torrent that would make a misnomer of the name they had given to the ocean this war would be fought on. Yes, they had been hit hard, treacherously hard, but they were already fighting back. This action was not yet concluded. The Admiral wanted to see what was left after

the last of the planes came in, and he was keeping his fingers crossed behind his back as he waited on word from Van Valkenburgh on the *Arizona*.

Halsey looked at Captain Murray, his brow furrowed, eyes set, and that big jaw jutting forward with sudden confidence behind the anger that was so apparent in what he said next. It is said that history never quite repeats itself, but it rhymes. In this instance it was a haunting echo of a statement the Admiral made when he saw the damage inflicted on the men, ships and facilities at Pearl Harbor.

“George,” he said. “Before we're done with them, the Japanese language will be spoken only in Hell!”

Murray nodded silently.

Chapter 8

Karpov stood on the bridge of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the smile barely faded from his expression as his mind now turned to the action that lay ahead. Behind him stood Anton Fedorov, unmasked and newly recruited to the Admiral's camp, seeing no other way to be relevant in the situation, and realizing that the power he was handed in Karpov's offer of *Starpom* would otherwise have to be won by conflict, and possibly even blood on the ship. That was something he was not yet prepared to foment, and the fact that they were now on the edge of momentous events made it even more imperative that his voice be heard at the command level, and without Karpov's suspicion poisoning their relationship.

"Well," said Karpov. "It's begun, and that damn ice has delayed us just enough to miss the main event. But better late than never, eh Fedorov?" He looked down the long forward bow of the ship, remembering every occasion when those missile doors would open and the weapons would snap up, hearing the soft hiss of the inclination jets fire to aim them before their engines would erupt with bright fire and the billow of hot white smoke. He remembered every target, every kill, and every heated moment when the ship had faced the danger of enemy attack. One by one, those missiles had been expended, *Kirov's* power slowly diminishing each and every time it was used, until at one point, there in the Coral Sea, they had finally fired the last of their AA missile suite. The ship had been reduced to the level of a fast cruiser, with only a fraction of the power it now held beneath that deck.

Karpov's eyes played over the hatches where the S-300s were stored, straying to the long broad compartments that harbored the dreadful *Moskit-II*. Now he remembered that first tactical briefing after the ship's arrival. Perhaps only Fedorov remembered it now, as every other man aboard seemed oblivious to all they had experienced and endured before that strange moment of Paradox came upon them. But it was still all clear to Karpov. He could hear Fedorov's voice in his mind, cautioning him about the need to respect the offensive power of the ships from this era, and telling him that even the 8-inch guns on these enemy cruisers could land fatal blows on *Kirov* if they ever got close enough to do so.

They were like the world's best heavyweight, he thought, fast, lean, with lightning quick reflexes and ring savvy unlike any man to ever put on the

gloves. They could dance and move out of harm's way in half a heartbeat, and when they attacked, they had the most murderous punch ever seen. Yet, for all of that, there was but one flaw they had to live with. *Kirov* was a heavyweight with a glass jaw. One good punch from their opponent might be all it would take to deliver a knockout blow that would end the ship's reign as the world champion. Fedorov's first warning from that meeting was in his mind now...

"Do you have any idea what a 15 or 16-inch shell would do to this ship if we should be hit? Even an 8-inch shell could easily penetrate the forward deck and ignite the missile fuel and warheads there, and my guess is that this ship would literally be blown to pieces in that event. We are not invulnerable."

And he could remember exactly what he had said in response... *"But our advantage lies elsewhere. True, we have only armored certain segments of the ship, the citadels, the reactor cores. But we do not have to come anywhere near an enemy ship to deliver a barrage of precision guided firepower on the enemy. Our missiles can fire from a range of 250 kilometers or more! Our cannon can use rocket assisted munitions and range out to 50 kilometers if need be. We can stand off and destroy any fleet we encounter, and they will never even see us. The only equivalent weapon the enemy might deploy is a fleet of aircraft carriers, and we can find them with our helicopters first, and sink them before they become a threat. Should any dare launch an air strike at us, our SAM defenses will be more than enough to protect us."*

Volsky had chimed in with another warning, and one Karpov knew only too well now. *"What you say is true for a time,"* The Admiral had said. *"It was fortunate that we replenished our primary missile inventory for the live fire exercise before we were able to complete our scheduled maneuvers. We find ourselves with reloads aboard for our Moskit-IIs. But yet there is a limit to what we can accomplish, yes? We now have forty Moskit-IIs in inventory instead of only twenty, and ten each for our other missiles. That means we have a gun with 60 rounds, and after they have been fired, all we have left are the 152mm cannon and a few torpedoes, twenty, to be exact. Certainly no ship in the world can match us now, yet we must be very judicious as to how we choose to actually use the weaponry we have."*

Very judicious indeed, thought Karpov. Experience can be a very hard teacher. The awful sound of Japanese dive bombers swooping down in a near

vertical attack was still fresh in his mind. His own lightning quick reflex for war had saved the ship that time, but it took half the *Kashtan* close in defense missiles in one massed salvo to do it. Even then, one plane got through, smashing savagely into the battle bridge on the aft segment of the ship, and it was only the 200mm armor on both the roof and deck of that compartment that had saved them.

That had been a moment of grave peril, and he knew he must heed the warnings long ago expressed by Fedorov and Volsky, and listen also to the voice of his own experience in fighting these many battles. One thing he could also never forget was the sheer determination of the men who fought on the ships of this day and age, and particularly the singular mindset of the Japanese, willing to give all in the moment of attack, embracing death if it could not be avoided, and willing to stop at nothing to deliver harm to their enemy. Look what it took to force Japan to finally surrender, he thought, the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That thought was echoed by the recollection of his own voice as he had answered Volsky that day.

“You are forgetting one other thing,” he had told him. *“We have nuclear warheads aboard.”*

Yes, at that moment they held power that was inconceivable to any generation of men who had ever lived or walked upon this earth or sailed its seas. At that moment they had Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or any other city they might choose, right in the palm of their hand, and all they had to do was clench their fist. Volsky had been quick to rule out use of those weapons from the very first, he thought, but I had them in mind right from the outset. I must admit that my deployment of that awesome power was less than judicious. I was young and brash back then, and believed nothing could harm us. I wanted to show our enemies just what we could do to them unless they fell into line, and yet, expending one of those precious warheads to kill an old American battleship and a few escorts was really a waste. It certainly had a very dramatic effect, but did it stop them? Not for one moment. In their ignorance they fought on, heedless of the danger we posed, but what else could they do?

Yes, he thought. That is a lesson I found very hard to learn, and I must not forget it this time around. This entire world is at war, and by God, they’ll fight to the finish. The world has never seen anything to rival the sheer unbridled terror of WWII. It makes all other wars pale by comparison. Even the so called ‘Great War’ that preceded it was merely a foreshock to the

cataclysm that WWII would bring. Entire cities would be burned and broken, with a hundred thousand or more killed in a single hour—twice the number of dead the Americans experienced over ten years in Vietnam. And it is not just the Japanese who would fight with ruthless determination. The Americans rooted them out of one cave after another, for four long years. They would lose more lives in combat in a single weekend to take one island than they would sacrifice in all those ten years they fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fedorov can give me the numbers.

So now I hold that pistol again, fully loaded, a gun with 60 rounds, and those three trump card warheads that could be utterly decisive if I use them at just the right moment. Fedorov won't want to hear that, but hopefully he will not be any further problem.

"You took Nikolin's report?" He turned to his new *Starpom*, and could not help noticing that there was something in the way Fedorov stood there on the bridge that was also decidedly different. Yes, he had been Captain here once. He had settled into the big chair, unwillingly at first, but in the long months at sea, through trial and fire, he had earned his place there. That experience was now quite evident in the man. Even the other junior officers can see it, sense it in him. I could see it from the very first. I knew something was different about him, and would have unmasked him in time in spite of every subterfuge, because no man can truly ever disguise who he really is. He's going to show his colors, one way or another. Can Fedorov see who I really am now? I wonder...

"Yes sir," said Fedorov. "Apparently there has already been a point of departure, and this time we had nothing whatsoever to do with it. That shouldn't surprise me, I suppose. This world, the history of these events, is already greatly changed."

"Your shattered mirror?" said Karpov.

"Yes, but what does surprise me is how true that image still is in so many ways. From what we've been able to determine, the Japanese strike force here, the *Kido Butai*, was almost identical to the one they sent to attack Pearl Harbor—six fleet carriers at its heart."

"But there's been a big change now," said Karpov. Nikolin had been closely monitoring radio traffic, along with another *mishman* who was fluent in Japanese. They had pieced the situation together from that traffic, surmising in time that there had been a carrier action northwest of Pearl Harbor.

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

“It’s quite serious, sir. If the reports are correct, and the Americans lost the *Lexington*, that now leaves them with only one carrier here in the Pacific.”

“Yet several of their battleships escaped harm,” said Karpov.

“Nikolin says he is fairly certain there was also a surface engagement involving those ships, but yes, it seems they have survived.”

“That would be Battleship Division 1,” said Fedorov the *Arizona*, *Oklahoma* and *Nevada*.”

“*Arizona*? That was the ship they made a monument of, am I correct?”

“Yes sir, perhaps one of the most famous ships in history, if only because of the way it died. It came to symbolize the entire Pearl Harbor attack.”

“That honor will now have to be given to another old battleship,” said Karpov. “And the Japanese? What do you think of that report?”

“It’s clear they also took hits in that carrier duel. My understanding is that two of their carriers were hit, with *Kaga* taking the worst of it. *Mishman* Tanaya says he’s picked up numerous radio intercepts where the Japanese are routing aircraft to other carriers, and away from *Kaga*. That ship has been detached from the main body, and from the code signals I was able to decrypt, it is being sent to Kwajalein, the closest Japanese anchorage, which tells me the damage must be serious. Otherwise they would have just ordered it back to Japan.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “Then this attack, while different in some respects, leaves the Americans in much the same position they were in the real history.”

“Except for the loss of *Lexington*, sir. That by far outweighs the survival of Battleship Division 1. In fact, I’m surprised the Japanese did not go after those ships and finish them off. My guess is that the damage to *Kaga*, and the weather front building today, compelled Nagumo to retire.”

“He was very cautious here, was he not?”

“Quite so, sir.”

“So there was no third strike against Pearl Harbor?”

“No sir, that carrier action preempted any possibility of that happening. We have identified at least two strike waves against the harbor, but we don’t really know the extent of the damage there, except to capital ships. Historically, 21 of 96 vessels in the harbor were hit, but only a dozen took

enough damage to put them out of action, and then for no more than a few months. Yes, it was a hard blow, but most of the battleships were re-floated and repaired fairly soon. Also, it now appears that two of the permanent losses, *Arizona* and *Oklahoma*, survived. So this wasn't the knockout blow many think it was. That said, there's been some radio traffic that concerns me, involving one particular ship, the *Neosho*. It was a tanker that arrived at Pearl Harbor on December 6th, carrying a million gallons of aviation fuel. Nikolin thinks it was destroyed."

"With all the battleships and the loss of that carrier," said Karpov, "why should one more merchant ship matter?"

"Because it was the largest tanker in the world when commissioned in 1939, and the only one this far west in the Hawaiian Islands. That ship literally kept the American fleet fueled in the early months of the war when it started to probe west towards the Solomons and Coral Sea. It's loss would be significant, but it is how and when it was destroyed that really matters here."

"Explain," said Karpov, folding his arms.

"Historically, the *Neosho* arrived in December 6th, docked at Hickam Airfield to deliver 500,000 gallons of Aviation Fuel, and then moved to a mooring right on Battleship Row at Ford Island. It tied off right between the battleships *California* and *Oklahoma*, though the latter was apparently at sea this time around. That said, it still had another half a million gallons of fuel in its tanks, and was offloading that to the fuel tanks on Ford Island the night of December 6. It was mostly finished when the Japanese attack started the following morning, and managed to slip off Battleship Row unharmed in the middle of the attack. It made it across the harbor to Merry Point, near the US submarine pens and the big oil tank farm that was adjacent to that area. Nikolin's report indicates something changed here, and that could be very significant."

Something had changed... That was an understatement if Fedorov could have known the details of what really happened. It seemed a small thing, the simple movement of a weather front, but it had huge effects on the outcome of the attack. The same weather that had masked the approach of the *Kido Butai*, and also served to delay the return of the American carriers, had instead moved faster than it once did. It allowed *Enterprise* and *Lexington* to get much farther east, giving them the opportunity to intervene, but also exposing them to the grave risk of counterattack.

The front swept through the islands on the morning of the 6th, where it

found *Neosho* still at sea, en route from San Pedro in California to deliver its aviation fuel. There, the rough seas for the heavily loaded tanker slowed it down considerably, and it was very late, arriving at Pearl Harbor in the pre-dawn hours of the 7th instead of the 6th. Running late, the ship's skipper, Captain John S. Phillips, obtained permission to move directly to the berth at Battleship Row to begin offloading fuel for Ford Island Naval Air Station.

To do so, ships always took the west channel, swung up and around Ford Island to reach Battleship Row, so their bows would be pointed west towards the harbor entrance when they berthed. This saved a lot of tug time turning the ships around if they had to sortie, and also helped manage harbor traffic. So *Neosho* was on the move that morning when the Japanese attack came in, and she was still fully loaded. The ship took the west channel, swung up past the old *Utah*, came around a few destroyer anchorages, and was right in the channel near Battleship Row when the attack started. It never reached its berthing near the *California*, because something happened to break a tiny link in the chain of causality, and it was going to make a great deal of difference in the months ahead.

Chapter 9

Yes, something had changed, a turning of the wind, a sea change as any old sailor might put it, and that wind had conspired with Fate to do a great many things. *Enterprise* and *Lexington* were early, *Neosho* was late. Battleships that should have been berthed in the harbor were out to sea about to open a long range gun duel with the heavy ships in the screening force, where *Kirishima* and *Hiei* were squaring off against Battleship Division 1. There was plenty of room on the Row, and an enterprising Captain Phillips thought he'd make up for lost time by berthing directly at Ford Island instead of first going to Hickam. And one more thing was about to happen, a few stray rounds from a Japanese Zero that would also have an impact far beyond their weight, and one no person in this time period would ever know about.

It was a Push Point on the history that no man could see that day, a small thing that would cause dramatic and catastrophic changes in the Meridians of time.

When the attack on Pearl Harbor started, one thing did ring true, the reflexive instinct of Captain Phillips to get his ship away from those battleships. He saw the planes coming in, the torpedo wakes streaking in to hit *California* right off his bow, and he quickly ordered a hard turn to starboard to head for the same refuge he had selected historically, the berthing at Merry Point near the submarine pens. He had the same good luck in getting there as he did in the old history, his AA guns even shooting down a Japanese plane on the way.

Neosho made it to Merry Point, right behind the *Castor*, a general stores issue ship that had been carrying ammunition. There the two ships were to have passed through the attack unharmed. At one point in the real history, both *Neosho* and *Castor* were strafed by an enemy plane, with no loss of personnel and little more than a damaged nut on the recoil cylinder of *Castor's* number three AA gun... But that did not happen this time.

Instead of a wayward strafing, it was a dive bomber from the second wave that made that attack. The absence of Battleship Division 1 had left three less targets in the Harbor, and by the time that wave arrived, even without the planes from *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, Battleship Row was finished. So instead, one enterprising pilot decided to attack the largest ship he could

find, and the 533 foot long *Neosho* seemed an appropriate choice, even if it wasn't a warship.

His name was Lt. Saburo Makino, with his radioman and rear gunner CPO Sueo Sukida. Both men were swooping down through the tattered Meridians of time that day, as they had been sheared and cut when the first wave attacks delayed the takeoff of a P-40 that was to have been flown by American pilot 2nd Lieutenant George Welch.

He and another pilot had just come back from a Christmas dinner and dance party at a hotel in Waikiki, and a long all-night poker game afterwards. When they saw the attack begin, the Lieutenant telephoned Haleiwa fighter strip and told them to get a pair of P-40s ready. Then he and his mate, 2nd Lieutenant Ken Taylor, jumped back in their Buick and barreled towards the airfield.

But they were just a little late.

A Japanese plane came in low and made a strafing run on that car as it sped towards the field, with the rounds close enough to force Welch to swerve off the road and barely avoid crashing. The delay of just a minute was all it took, something so insignificant that it passed the notice of any historian scrutinizing the battle in the long decades ahead. It didn't happen in Fedorov's history, but it happened here. So when Welch and Taylor got their Tomahawks up, they were somewhere else in the sky, a hot minute away, and Welch was busy trying to shoot down some other plane instead of number AII-250, flown by Lt. Saburo Makino.

That made all the difference in the world, and served to heavily underscore the tremendous effect that one man, a single pilot, a single sortie and attack, could have on the course of history. If Welch gets that plane, *Neosho* comes through the attack unscathed, in spite of the weather front that delayed her and kept her holds burgeoning with a million gallons of aviation fuel. If Welch is somewhere else, then Lieutenant Makino tips his plane over and comes down on top of *Neosho* to put his 500 pound bomb right on target. He did not even know the real significance of what he was about to do, and would not survive to learn anything more about it. The resulting explosion was catastrophic.

Neosho blew sky high, smashing Lieutenant Makino's plane to pieces as it pulled out of that dive. The ship was blown apart, the fireball so enormous that it completely engulfed the ammunition carrier *Castor* as well. Then that ship blew, with all that remained in its holds, and the fires rampaged

landward, immolating Merry Point, the submarine pens and tenders, CINCPAC Headquarters building, and then sweeping right on into the big oil storage tanks beyond.

Standing there in his office near the sub pens, watching the attack across the harbor at Battleship Row, was the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Pacific Fleet, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel. In Fedorov's history he would later report that it was only a stray machinegun round that had struck the window as he watched, punching a hole through and grazing his naval jacket, just one little scratch from the fingernail of fate that raised a small weal on his torso. He famously remarked to his communications officer, Commander Maurice Curts, "It would have been merciful had it killed me."

This time Fate's mercy would come in raging fire. Minutes after that explosion, both Kimmel and Curts were killed, along with tens of other ranking officers in CINCPAC Headquarters, decapitating the US command structure in one mighty blow.

The destruction went far beyond the removal of an Admiral whose days in command were already well numbered. It took out those sub pens, destroying *Narwhal*, *Dolphin*, and *Tautog*, along with a pair of sub tenders. *Narwhal* would not get her 19 ships, sinking over 40,000 tons over 15 patrols. *Tautog* would never get her 26 kills totaling 72,606 tons. They once called the boat '*Tautog* the Terrible,' but that would never be. *Dolphin* had ended up a school boat after serving well in a reconnaissance role early in the war, but none of that would happen now. Those subs sunk 41 ships, more kills than the entire *Kido Butai* had inflicted just now with its attack, and their absence would certainly have some as yet unseen effect on the course of the war.

The raging inferno eventually engulfed 40% of the oil tank farm behind the sub base, burning for days after with a thick black smoke that hung over the islands like a pall of doom. The loss of that oil tanker, all its aviation fuel, and 40% of the fuel stocks in that tank farm, were going to have a far greater impact on US operations than all the damaged battleships and cruisers combined. Thrown on the scales with the loss of Lady Lex, the aborted attack on Pearl Harbor was a much more devastating blow to the US Pacific Fleet than it had been in Fedorov's history books.

He did not know that as he stood on the bridge of *Kirov* at that moment with Karpov, but he could feel it. Something seemed to hang in the tension of that moment that spoke of destiny and disaster, something far more profound

than Karpov's desultory appraisal of Nikolin's radio traffic intercept reports.

"So what if this oil tanker were lost?" asked Karpov.

"It would severely inhibit American fleet operations in the next few months. Ships at sea in this era were thirsty beasts. A destroyer would need replenishing every three days, and carriers steaming at higher speeds burned through fuel at an alarming rate. *Neosho* was an essential link in the thin logistical chain out to Hawaii."

"Then why didn't the Japanese just target the fuel bunkers? You've already pointed out that the loss of those old battleships counted for little."

"Quite right," said Fedorov. "In fact, historians remain amazed to this day that the Japanese did not place more emphasis on logistical targets in this attack. Considering the fact that they went to war for largely economic reasons, this is quite surprising. Their fuel stocks had diminished to about 50 million barrels, no more than 18 months supply due to the US oil embargo. They moved south to secure every vital source of oil and other resources between Hawaii and the Middle East, yet in striking here, they largely ignored the same fuel that would be so important to their enemy. Some say it was the samurai mindset of the attacking pilots, who wanted to strike ships of war, but the same behavior was also seen in the use of the submarines."

"Submarines?" That word had always been a hot button for Karpov.

"Yes sir, the Japanese had many subs involved in this operation, and after the attack quite a few were assigned to interdict the sea lanes between the US west coast and Hawaii, but they largely ignored merchant shipping. Only 19 US merchant ships would be sunk over the next ten months, and most of those in the weeks just after the attack. The Germans tried to persuade them to alter their submarine warfare strategy, but they refused to change their preference for targeting warships. For them, a warship was their real enemy, with trained men and a potential to do harm to the empire, and something that took time and much effort to replace. By contrast, they thought lowly merchant ships were harmless, and even if sunk, might be easily replaced, and built quickly in very great numbers. The German U-boats did far better in the Atlantic than the Japanese ever did here in the Pacific."

"Yes, I remember you telling me this. Well there isn't much we can do about Japanese sub Captains wanting to kill big fish—that is, as long as they stay out of my way. As for the rest of this discussion, I find it quite enlightening. Logistics. We certainly don't have a fuel problem, if our reactors settle down and leave us in one place and time for a while."

“I’ve spoken to Chief Dobrynin,” said Fedorov. “He’s detected nothing unusual, and the reactors seem to have stabilized.”

“Then the question now,” said Karpov, “is how to best proceed. Where would this *Kido Butai* be at the moment? Have you plotted that position estimate I asked for?”

“I have, sir.” Fedorov walked to the Plexiglas navigation screen and indicated a position northwest of the Hawaiian Islands. “Considering the weather, my best guess is that they are somewhere here, and this is the predictive plot I’ve laid in based on their historical route of withdrawal. Yet they’ve fought a naval action here, and that tends to break up a task force into smaller components. It’s likely that the screening force is no longer with the carriers, and we have no battle damage assessment on the action fought with the American battleships.”

They wouldn’t find that out for some time either, until Nikolin determined that another ship seemed to be routing to Kwajalein as well, the battleship *Hiei*. In the duel with Van Valkenburgh’s battleships, *Hiei* had taken the worst of it, sustaining eight hits of various calibers, including three by 14 inch guns. Destroyer *Kagero*, who’s name literally meant ‘heat haze,’ also took the heat when a 14-inch shell got lucky. At the same time, the Japanese battleships put two solid hits on both *Nevada* and *Oklahoma*, and one more on *Arizona*, but the resulting fires would be controlled.

The first face off between the battleships, that both sides once thought would determine the outcome of the war, therefore proved most indecisive when Admiral Mikawa broke off the engagement after seeing the damage to *Hiei*. *Kirishima* could still fight, but the ships separated, with *Hiei* heading due west away from the action at the best speed it could make, just 17 knots. Even that was enough to get her out of harm’s way, for the lumbering American battleships, maintaining formation throughout the entire battle, could not pursue effectively, nor was Van Valkenburgh inclined to do so. A pair of fast heavy cruisers might have finished the battleship off, but none were present, and bad weather set in again soon after, severely hindering air search operations, and even making it difficult for his escort of four destroyers to keep station. Even the seaplane launches from *Tone* and *Chikuma* had to be cancelled, and that, along with Nagumo’s caution, ended the battle.

“If the Japanese do withdraw as they did historically,” said Fedorov, “then we may hear about them next at Midway.”

“They are going to bomb it?”

“Possibly. Historically they simply detached a pair of destroyers to shell it, but this course shows the *Kido Butai* moving north of that island, well within air bombing range.”

“Plot a course to get me within range of those ships,” said Karpov. How soon can we move to helo operations?”

“I recommend 28 knots on this course,” Fedorov pointed to the screen as a blue line lit up showing his plot. “That would put our KA-40s in range to cover this segment of the anticipated enemy course in about... three hours.”

Enough time to check in with the diplomats, thought Karpov. He had ordered Tyrenkov to relay his demands to Tokyo, along with specific instructions on a coded signal he would send to initiate any further discussion. He then briefed Nikolin on how he wanted him to send out that message. Now he told Fedorov about it for the first time.

“I have made demands of the Japanese concerning their ongoing occupation of Siberian territory.”

“You expect them to concede, sir? You think they’ll return Vladivostok simply because you demand it?”

“Of course not, but I have spelled out the consequences should they fail to do so.”

“What consequences?” Fedorov still wanted to see into the darkest corner of Karpov’s mind.

“First, that a state of war would exist between the Japanese Empire and the Free Siberian State, effective at 2:00 today, December 9th on this side of the international dateline. That is two hours and forty minutes from now as I read the ship’s chronometer, assuming it was correctly reset. It’s still December 8th in Hawaii and the United States, and Roosevelt will likely make his famous little infamy speech shortly, then Congress follows with a declaration of war on Japan at 1:10pm today. Roosevelt won’t sign it for another three hours, but that was a mere formality. As for Siberia, I sign off on hostilities at 02:00, and I have also formally dispatched a message to the American Embassy at Irkutsk informing them of my demands, my intention to declare war, and my open support of the United States in the Pacific as far as I am able. I have requested their ambassador arrange negotiations concerning the use of Siberian territory for wartime purposes.”

“You still think you can interest them in an Aleutians strategy?”

“That remains to be seen, but before those discussions, I intend to make

myself useful, and also to put a little fire in the demands I have made of Japan. I have already warned them of severe consequences, telling them exactly what they can expect if they fail to comply. And like our old nemesis Ivan Volkov, I can make predictions as well. I've told them I will lay waste to their sea lanes and surface warships unless they begin the immediate withdrawal of their military forces from Siberian territory. The language was not so brazen, but my message was clear, at least on paper."

"Then what happens next, sir? You know very well that the Japanese will not accede to your demands. The most you can expect will be delay and obfuscation, requests for negotiations and a better equity in terms of the agreement will certainly be the order of the day."

"Negotiations? Yes, that will be quite tedious, as you suggest. You see, Fedorov, like Volkov, I am no diplomat at heart, and I have little patience for such negotiations. But I am a prophet when it comes to deciding what happens to the Japanese Navy now, and when I negotiate, I do not make concessions, but an ultimatum. At 02:00 today I expect to be at war with Japan, and I will not fail to see that they know it."

Part IV

The Lost Convoy

“There was no moon. The sea was as black as the lowest depths of despair. Far below in the troughs and now on the crest of the waves, little marine creatures flashed their phosphorescence in defiance, like little stars fallen from grace on high. The wind whistled through the rigging like the cry of lost souls. The gates of hell were opened and the devil himself roamed the night...”

— **Byron Wilhite**, War Diary, Pensacola Convoy

Chapter 10

After the fuse was lit, the fires of war spread very rapidly throughout the Pacific. In the Philippines, the principle Far East base of the US Military was presided over by a man who inwardly deemed himself another emperor of sorts, General Douglas MacArthur. He had come out of retirement to take the post, and yet, the force he had in hand was really not one to pose a grave threat to Japan, in spite of Japanese planners thinking to the contrary. The Navy had argued the Philippines sat astride the sea lanes that would carry Japan's soon to be conquered resources back to the empire. That required the Japanese Army to occupy the Philippines, a land area equivalent to the home islands, or even the British Isles in total size.

Before they could do that, it would be necessary to destroy any offensive capability the US possessed in those islands, and the one force uppermost in the minds of Japanese planners was the United States Army Air Force. It had four squadrons of fighters, and 31 B-17 bombers, the largest contingent of those planes outside the US. Those bombers really represented almost all of MacArthur's immediate offensive capability against the Japanese, the only way he could participate in U.S. War Plan Rainbow 5. Their target would be the Japanese bases on Formosa, principally at Takao, seeking to preempt and forestall its use as a springboard for further hostilities.

It was a foolish plan in retrospect, for the Japanese had 117 A6M2 Zeroes at Takao, which was more than enough to neutralize that bomber threat. Yet it became even worse when the American raid, quite literally, never got off the ground. War warnings were telephoned in, messages received of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the only US radar on the islands at Iba Field in the north was spotting possible flights of enemy planes. Rumors were flying through the air crews at the fields, but US aircraft remained mostly on the ground. At one point two squadrons scrambled, with one bomber group, but after flying about over Manila for some time, they eventually were forced to land and refuel. Their timing had been wrong, but the Japanese would get theirs right. Their main air strikes would come in right in the middle of that refueling operation.

MacArthur had finally given his subordinates the order to strike Formosa at 10:15, and the Japanese struck an hour later, while almost every plane available was still on the ground being serviced.

Whether those bombers over Formosa would have made any difference has been debated by many historians and dismissed as irrelevant. Notoriously ill equipped to strike naval targets, they were not going to prevent a Japanese invasion of the islands, or seriously interfere with enemy staging operations for such an offensive, because it was already at sea.

As for the navy, there were two cruisers, the *Houston* and *Marblehead*, along with 13 old WWI era destroyers, and 23 submarines that might have made a difference. But US sub tactics could have learned much from the Germans, and the subs that rushed to clear the harbor ended up scattering out to sea on recon patrol duties. No provision in their orders was ever made for defensive mine laying, close in coastal defense of likely invasion sites, or even patrols off enemy harbors likely to initiate offensive operations. Thus those 23 subs were largely squandered as an offensive weapon, or even an adequate defensive naval shield. By the time they would be needing a safe harbor to replenish fuel and ammunition, Manila would be in enemy hands.

The Japanese invasion of the Philippines was going to come off right on schedule, and there was nothing that Emperor MacArthur, with all his haughty arrogance and inflated self-confidence, could do about it. One brave man had put himself, and his ships, into the fire to attack the enemy in those early days, and his name was Admiral William 'Bull' Halsey. With Admiral Kimmel and much of the senior staff at CINCPAC gone in that terrible conflagration, Halsey would return to Pearl Harbor to find himself the senior officer in the Pacific. He had one lonesome carrier and a pack of fast cruisers to run with it, and that was exactly what he decided to do.

"Come on, boys," he said to the harbor crews. "Let's get this baby turned around and out to sea in 24 hours."

When Van Valkenburgh arrived with Battleship Division 1 six hours later, Halsey went over to take his report.

"How were those live fire exercises?" he quipped.

"Gave it to the Japs real good," said the Captain. "These old ladies were as tough as we hoped they would be."

When Halsey learned there were a few bloodied Japanese ships out there, he had it in mind to get out to sea as fast as he could and see if he could finish them off. But before he did anything, he got on the phone to Fleet Admiral King in the States and asked for the one thing he needed more than anything else now, aircraft carriers.

"I'll give you all the support I can," said King, "but can you hold there

at Hawaii? Should you fall back to the West coast?”

“Are you serious? We do that and it will add another 2000 miles to every fleet sortie, and it’s as good as planting a ‘For Rent’ sign up on Opana Point for the Japs.”

“Alright, do you want a battleship division? We’ve got the 3rd and 5th on the Atlantic coast.”

“Battleships? They’ll only slow me down. It’s carriers I need now, and fast cruisers. Get *Saratoga* out here from San Diego as fast as she can move, and by God, unless you plan on invading France tomorrow, send me anything you’ve got afloat on the East coast as well.”

“You can have *Yorktown*, *Hornet* and *Wasp*. That’s the lot of them, but we won’t have the new *Essex* class up for months.”

“I warned you about the big Jap buildup in carriers,” said Halsey, the frustration evident in his voice. “Now they’ve just written the goddamned book on how to use them.”

“We’ll get it fixed, Bill, but for now it’s a come as you are party, and you’ll just have to make do. I’ll send along the 7th Cruiser Division as icing on the cake, and if you need destroyers, we’ve got them in droves.”

“One more thing, Rey,” said Halsey, using the Admiral’s nickname, “they hit the fuel stocks here pretty hard. We can operate, but we lost *Neosho*, and we’ll need tanker support as much as anything else. *Pecos* and *Trinity* were in the Phils, but word is they made a run for it last night, heading for the Dutch East Indies. We’ve got two more inbound, but most everything else is on the West coast.”

“We’ll get them moving,” said King. “Now what about the Philippines?”

“You know we wrote that off in almost every pre-war plan worth its salt,” said Halsey. “I never thought War Plan Orange was ever going to float with a battleship sortie to relieve MacArthur, and that’s entirely out of the question now. Admiral Hart knows he’s on a short lease now in the Philippines, which is why he’s getting those oilers out of harm’s way. I give MacArthur three months—four at best—but the longer he can hold out, the better. We’ll need time to get off the canvas here and back in the ring. And we’ll need new bases out here, and good anchorages. You’d better tell Marshall that they ought to get on the phone with the French and twist a few arms. Where’s MacArthur going to go to reorganize if the Japs kick him out of the Philippines? The only place I can think of is Australia, and for that to

happen, we've got to get there before the enemy does. I can't do that in one long jump from Pearl. I'll need bases in the South Pacific."

Before he sortied again with the *Enterprise*, Halsey took stock of the damage at Pearl, appalled by the blazing fires that had consumed so much of the precious fuel his ships were going to need. Preliminary reports indicated they would lose 40% of the stocks, but that still left enough for fleet operations. Halsey knew that he'd have more oil when those tankers arrived from the West coast, and if there was no place to put it, they'd just leave it in the ships until it could be off loaded.

The situation was going from bad to worse as the scope of the full Japanese attack became apparent. In addition to the Philippines, they were hitting Hong Kong, Malaya, and Burma, and Halsey knew the resource rich Dutch Colonies would fall soon after. As he looked at the map, trying to decide how he could possibly operate now, it was evident that he would first have to build some new support structure in the Pacific so he had half a chance at using those oilers to get fuel out west. It was a task made much more difficult than it was in Fedorov's history, for two big reasons.

The first was the open hostilities between two former Allies, France and Britain, a sad chapter that both Fedorov and Volsky had seen re-written when *Kirov* shifted to June of 1940. That month, the fall of France cast doubt on the future status of all French Colonies in Africa and the Pacific. But the outbreak of hostilities between British and French Naval forces at Mers-el-Kebir, and the subsequent British Campaign against French holdings in Syria and Lebanon, had gone a long way towards hardening the attitude of French citizens in all her colonies. That meant that all of North and West Africa was soon hostile ground, and the British were already at war with the French at sea in the Med, and in Syria.

The French also had colonies in the Pacific, controlling all the New Hebrides island group southeast of the Solomons, which was a very strategic place, and also in French Polynesia. Both holdings sat astride vital sea lanes and lines of communications between the United States and Australia, and this was a development that another man named Ivan Volkov did not fail to appreciate. He was reason two, because Volkov had an embassy in Tokyo as well as Berlin, and he had used it to fill the Japanese war planners with the benefit of his much touted 'Prophecies.' His whispered words were going to complicate matters in the South Pacific for Halsey and all others concerned.

* * *

The Japanese, with well developed plans for a movement south into the resource rich South Pacific, quickly surmised the value of existing French colonies there, and perceived their vulnerability. As such, Japan negotiated to secure permission to post troops in French Indochina, and set up military bases there.

This had all happened in the real history before *Kirov* started its long saga, but in these altered states, a most alarming change resulting from the Anglo-Franco war would now weigh heavily in the scales of the War in the Pacific. Ivan Volkov had been a very busy man with his visits to Adolf Hitler, and then to Japan, where he attempted to strongly warn the Japanese of the strategic necessity of occupying French held territories as soon as possible.

There was already a sympathetic ear for this strategy among Japanese planners. They saw the French colonies as essential to cutting sea lanes between the United States and Australia, isolating the latter, and attempting to force Australia out of the war. That, plus the fact that Japan already had a considerable commercial presence in the New Hebrides Islands, where 1300 Japanese workers labored at the important nickel and magnesium mines on New Caledonia, led the planners of the Rising Sun Empire to see the successful intervention in French Indochina as a template for what they might quickly achieve in the other French Pacific colonies.

That was the strategy they pursued, opening secret negotiations with the French and assuring the solidarity of those territories if their security could be guaranteed. To this end, Japan obtained permission to post a small security contingent on New Caledonia to protect the mines, while secretly planning a much more significant intervention timed with the attack on Pearl Harbor. In Late November of 1941, a task force was assembled in the Japanese Caroline Islands bastion of Truk, with a full SNLF battalion to move quickly by destroyer transport to New Caledonia, and specifically, the vital port of Noumea. It was to be followed by a slower reinforcement convoy with an additional full regiment, and basing supplies.

While the French in that colony had eventually sided with the Free French movement, that was not going to happen in this history, and Japan would gain a most important base in New Caledonia before the Allies could organize forces to prevent that. Further east, in French Polynesia, the

Japanese influence was not yet a factor, and, in spite of considerable resentment towards the British, French Colonial citizens on Tahiti eventually opted to attempt to remain neutral.

Halsey knew he needed new bases in the Pacific, and fast, which is why he bent Admiral King's ear on the matter. Thankfully, King understood the gravity of the situation, and urged Marshall to join him in a bid to convince Roosevelt of the urgent need for quick negotiations with the French.

"Negotiations?" said Roosevelt, rising to the occasion. "I'll read them the Riot Act! If they think they've got trouble with the British now, just wait until we show up."

Halsey would get his wish, for when pressed heavily by the United States to permit US forces on the French held Island of Bora Bora, they agreed, asking as a concession if the United States would refrain from declaring war on France. Roosevelt had already appointed a Navy man, his good friend Admiral William D. Leahy, as Ambassador to France, and he quickly telephoned him to plan a strategy. It would be said that Germany's response to the US Declaration of War on Japan would largely dictate the American attitude toward France, but if the French could sweeten the deal now with Bora Bora, the government of the United States would take that into full consideration.

So it was that Operation Bobcat was quickly conceived and launched, with Bull Halsey leading the charge. It was a plan to send 5000 US troops and service personnel to Bora Bora, which had an excellent lagoon that could only be entered in one place, easy to defend from enemy submarines. There they would set up a naval fueling station and supply center. Known as the "Pearl of the Pacific," Halsey wanted to crack open the oyster and get that pearl in hand before the Japanese could do anything about it. Thankfully, it was too remote to attract Japanese interest before the war. Halsey hoped that this operation could be concluded successfully without incident, and the American toe hold in French Polynesia might then help to eventually bring all those territories in to the Allied camp.

Even so, the loss of the New Hebrides was a severe blow to American war strategy, and one that would also strongly impact events as far away as North Africa. Seeing the cordon of Japanese strength slowly encroaching on its homeland, Australia and New Zealand decided that it was absolutely necessary to recall Commonwealth Divisions presently serving in Syria and Libya. This was going to mean that the British would soon lose the able

services of the veteran 6th, 7th and 9th Australian Divisions, as well as the 2nd New Zealand Division that had just tangled with Rommel again in Operation Crusader before the outbreak of the Pacific war. The vacuum these troop withdrawals would create in the Middle East would soon change the balance of power there again, and give Rommel some very unexpected opportunities.

Everything was connected, with the tenuous lines of fate and destiny strung across the globe in a web of causality. In the Pacific, particularly at this tempestuous early stage, a single ship sailing along one of those Meridians could cause a change in the course of the war that would have grave ramifications. One major point of divergence had already taken place west of Pearl Harbor, and now Lady Lex was at the bottom of the sea instead of in Halsey's fast carrier group. Two more such events were now about to occur, one involving a relief operation headed for the Philippines dubbed "Operation Plum," and another involving a pair of strange ships that were never supposed to be at sea.

Chapter 11

Admiral King's pledge of three more fleet carriers for the Pacific was heartening, but as lonesome as it seemed for the *Enterprise* now, there was strange company out west that Halsey hoped to make good use of. While the Asiatic Fleet was fairly pathetic, there were a pair of unusual ships there that were part of the fleet that never was in Fedorov's history books. They had been originally conceived in the 1920s, possibly as a way to circumvent the restrictions on fleet carriers in the Washington Naval Treaty. The Japanese had begun the arms race here with their hybrid *Gozo* Class Cruiser Carrier, and the Germans answered with the *Goeben*. But the Americans also had a plan for a similar ship, one that had seen real ink on the drawing boards, but was cancelled before the war Fedorov studied. Here, however, it was another case of altered states putting ships at sea that had never been built.

USS *Antietam*, BCV-1, was the lead ship in the class, and it was soon followed by the *Shiloh*, with both ships commissioned before the war. They were 650 feet long, with a 350 foot flight deck aft that was later extended to nearly 400 feet, and hanger space for 24 aircraft. That left just enough room up front for the conning tower and a pair of triple 6-inch gun turrets, the typical armament of a light cruiser, including eight more 5-inch dual purpose guns, with four on each side edging out that flight deck. The two ships were at Davao in the Philippines when the war started, and Admiral Hart ordered them out to sea, heading south for the Dutch East Indies with those two oilers and the seaplane carrier *Langley*.

The general concept was argued for further development in the US Navy, a seeming compromise between the big gun school and the flat top camp. The Marines liked the ships because they had space below decks for a strong reinforced company or two, and provided an excellent platform for shore fire support from those forward guns, as well as air cover over a landing zone. They saw them as a perfect complement to a small amphibious landing task force, and trained with both ships in that capacity off San Diego before the war.

The Japanese were in love with this hybrid cruiser/carrier concept, and they had several more in the ship yards, and were eyeing older battleships like *Ise* and *Hyuga* for conversion to hybrid "battlecarriers." Their special

SNLF battalions had not failed to see the same utility in the ships, and both *Gozo* and *Mezu* were designated for special small landing operations to the distant Pacific isles.

As to extending the idea to a larger hull, the Navy decided its successful conversion of *Lexington* and *Saratoga* would be the end of that road. From now on, all new carriers would be built from the ground up on all new hulls, and several were already under construction. So *Antietam* and *Shiloh* would be the only two ever built for the US Navy, which decided that full sized fleet carriers would do the job much better than these hybrids.

Halsey was nonetheless grateful those two ships were afloat on December 8th, and he was counting on them getting to safe water so they could operate with *Enterprise*. With Operation Bobcat in mind, Halsey sent word to Captain James Hansen on the *Antietam*, telling him he should take his small task group to Suva Bay in the Fiji Island Group, wait there, and stay out of trouble. It was a fateful order, because the French were soon going to complicate matters for the US. Those two hybrid cruiser carriers would soon be right in the middle of more trouble than they needed.

With war imminent, the US had dispatched a number of forces to reinforce the Philippines. Some were air groups, like the B-17s that arrived just as the Japanese attack began at Pearl Harbor. Others were land units intended to reinforce MacArthur's garrison, basing personnel, engineers, and even crated aircraft were all heading west on the Pacific as the Japanese offensive began. One such convoy sailed under the code name "Operation Plum," which was an Acronym standing for **P**hilippines, **L**Uzon, **M**anila. It was escorted by the cruiser *Pensacola* and the submarine chaser *Niagara*, with four transports, *Republic*, *Chaumont*, *Meigs*, and *Holbrook*, and three freighters, *Admiral Halstead*, *Coast Farmer*, and the *Bloemfontein* under Dutch colors. The convoy was being routed southwest instead of trying to take the more direct route which might take it too close to Japanese controlled territories. They planned to make a stop at Port Moresby and then come up through the Dutch East Indies to Davao, but the outbreak of war changed all that.

Soon the leisurely cruise on the open Pacific was given new urgency. Crews were quickly put to work, painting over white hulls and superstructures in haze grey, removing the white canvas on the life boats, and then the men were sent below to don life jackets and look through the cargo and find anything that might serve as a deck gun for the otherwise

unprotected cargo ships. *Republic* found four British 75mm guns in her hold, and the crews dragged them up onto the weather deck, feeling just a little more secure when they had tied them down fore and aft, until it was discovered there was no ammunition for the guns on board.

Commander Guy Clark, the Captain of the *Republic*, shook his head. “Well at least we might look a little threatening,” he said, and he gave orders that if a Japanese sub were spotted on the surface the crews were to rush to the guns and look as though they were prepping them for action. In fact, he ordered drills to that effect, though the whole exercise seemed to mirror the sense of futility hanging over the entire Navy at that moment. “Here we are rushing to serve an empty gun,” he said to the Army commander aboard, Brig. Gen. Julian F. Barnes, but there was nothing else to be done.

“At least we’ve got *Pensacola* out there,” said Barnes.

Things got edgy when a report came in that a Japanese sub had been spotted near the Ellice Islands, even though they were 300 miles away. Then late on December 8th, word came from Pearl that they were to divert their course to Fiji and wait at Suva Bay for further instructions. The Navy Brass, particularly Halsey, had decided that the waters ahead were too uncertain. If they continued, the *Pensacola* Convoy would soon be entering French controlled waters, and no one knew whether or not a state of war might exist between the US and France. Suva Bay seemed a safe alternative, and Halsey then ordered *Antietam* and *Shiloh* to get over there to put some more teeth in the defense of that convoy.

Two days later, just as the convoy was arriving at Suva Bay, it was learned that Germany had declared war on the United States in support of Japan, and they were insisting that all Axis partners do the same. The French equivocated, afraid that they might be on the wrong side of the equation, but eventually bowed to pressure and issued a formal declaration that day, though the French Ambassador in Washington stated it was carried out with great regret.

“You can regret it all you want now,” said the US Secretary of state, Cordell Hull. “But I can assure you that you will certainly regret it a good deal more before this is over.”

That said, the French then made a formal request that the US send no forces to Bora Bora as they had agreed earlier. Hull smiled, looked the man squarely in the eye, and gave it to him in his best Tennessee accent. “Mister Ambassador,” he said. “Don’t suppose the Japanese have done away with the

entire United States Navy in that dastardly attack they just pulled. Now I've got one ornery Fleet Admiral over at Pearl Harbor, and he's dead set on occupying those Islands. We're coming as planned, and if you want to do anything about it, you'll have to get past Bull Halsey first."

And that ended the matter. The US was coming, but French pride, which was considerable and well wounded in this war, would not allow them to simply hand over French territory without some action in reprisal. So word was quickly sent to the French Far East Fleet, such as it was, and they were told to prepare to initiate hostilities against any American shipping entering French territorial waters. For good measure, they passed on information concerning the American plans to the Japanese, hoping they might get some support from them in the matter, and it was a bid that paid them good dividends.

In Fedorov's history, the French might have posed no threat to the *Pensacola* Convoy, or any other American shipping in the Pacific, but again, things were different now in this world. As France was falling, the carrier *Bearn* was sent packing on a mission very much like the one HMS *Rodney* was undertaking when she met her fate. The ship was carrying gold to safety in the West Indies. That was yet another ship that was to have been designed as a battleship, but when the French saw the British carrier *Argus*, they got other ideas and converted *Bearn* to a carrier. The work was done in 1927, making the ship old and slow at 21 knots in 1941, but it was a carrier, with 30 aircraft aboard, and that made it a significant ship.

In better days, the carrier had proudly served in the French *Force de Raid*, and even participated in the hunt for the German raider *Graf Spee*. Then, as France's fortunes declined, she sent her fortune abroad in the holds of that carrier, escorted by the cruisers *Jean de Arc* and *Emile Bertin*. They were supposed to transport the gold to Halifax, but never got there due to a U-boat scare. Instead they diverted to Martinique, where they would have been interned, save for a timely warning that came from Ivan Volkov.

So it was that the French ordered the little flotilla to slip away before the Armistice with Germany was signed, and it made the long, hazardous journey to the Pacific thru the South Atlantic, around the Cape to Madagascar to refuel, and then on to French Indochina at Saigon. It was there before the Japanese offensive began, when the French decided to move it out of an impending war zone to safer climes—in their colonial island holdings of the New Hebrides. There it cooperated with the Japanese as they landed troops

on New Caledonia, again another insult, but at least from a nation that was a supposed ally in this war.

But *Bearn* was not alone with those two cruisers. The French also had a small flotilla at Saigon, ships they had moved to the Pacific before the war. The cruisers *Lamotte-Picquett*, *Suffren*, and four destroyers sailed with the carrier to Noumea, *Fougueux*, *Frondeur*, *Lansquenet*, and *Le-Hardi*. All the power the French Pacific Fleet could muster was now massed at Noumea, closing like a steel fist as the ships gathered. This war would see fleets massed with ships in the hundreds, but now, right at the outset of the conflict, the French had managed to put together a task force comprised of a carrier, four cruisers, and four destroyers. It was the most powerful naval force for a thousand miles in any direction, and the raging Bull Halsey was nowhere at hand. Vice Admiral Decoux from Saigon took command, planting his flag on the *Bearn*. The only question now was whether he knew how to use the force he had, and what he might decide to do with it.

At that same moment, the *Pensacola* convoy was heaving to at Suva Bay, a little over 700 nautical miles to the northeast, or about two days at 15 knots. The convoy ships were carrying 9,000 drums of high octane Aviation Gas on the *Admiral Halstead*. 18 crated P-40 Tomahawks of the 24th Fighter Group, and the 2nd Battalion of the 131st Field Artillery with twelve 75mm guns, and 48 more British 75s bound for Luzon were on the Dutch freighter *Blomfontein*. Most of the 7th Bomb group personnel were on the *Republic*, and 52 more Douglas A-24 Banshee dive bombers, also crated, were on the *Meigs*.

Along with all that equipment there were 4,600 National Guard personnel scattered among all the ships, considerable stores of half a million rounds of .50 caliber ammunition and another 9,600 for 37mm guns, 5000 bombs for the aircraft, 340 vehicles and trucks. The convoy code name was well chosen, for here was a ripe plum, low hanging fruit within easy reach of any enemy, and it was a most valuable, and highly volatile prize.

There was one other valuable prize at sea, en route from California to Australia with 125 more P-40s, with their pilots, and ammunition comprising the entire 4th Mobile Depot Group. Information on the likely existence of these convoys, fetched from the archives Volkov had compiled over the years from his old service jacket, was being fed to the Japanese and French. He did not know whether they would actually form and sail on schedule, but this one did, the *Pensacola* Convoy, ringing true like a bell that resounded through the

history, inviolate.

That convoy would now become the target of all that wounded French pride, and the single American cruiser in escort would find itself badly outnumbered if the French fleet ever found it at sea. But *Pensacola* was soon to get some much needed help from a pair of ships that never were, the USS *Antietam* and USS *Shiloh*, steaming at that moment in the Coral Sea.

MacArthur was eager to receive the guns and ammo on that convoy, and those 52 A-24 dive bombers, the Army version of the Dauntless SBD, would be most welcome. He pressed Admiral Hart to send out anything he had left. Gloomy and thinking the Japanese would soon have all the Philippines blockaded with their powerful navy, Hart wanted to keep what little he had in Manila Bay, but MacArthur persisted, another point of departure that would nudge things off in a new direction. He got his way instead of Hart, and the US cruiser *Houston* under Captain Rooks, with four destroyers, was sent south looking for the *Antietam* group, and with orders to sail for Fiji.

Meanwhile, a debate was on as to what should be done with the valuable convoy. Some argued that it should be recalled to Pearl Harbor or the West coast, but George Marshall took it to Roosevelt one morning, and the president was fairly decisive.

“Where is it now?” he asked.

“Approaching Suva Bay,” said Marshall. “It was the only safe place we could send it until this gets decided.”

“Well, it’s half way there,” Roosevelt exclaimed. “Why recall it now? If it can’t reach MacArthur, then at the very least it should go to Australia.”

That decision made, the rest was about to become all new history. When Cliff Causton, B Battery, 148th Artillery, heard the news aboard the transport *Holbrook*, he was quite surprised.

“Australia?” he said to a fellow National Guardsman, Bill Heath. “I thought we were supposed to go to the Philippines.”

Willard A. Heath had smiled when he first heard he was being assigned to a ship that bore his own first name and middle initial, the 27,000 ton ex-steamship liner, now called the *Willard A. Holbrook*. He had never liked the name, preferring William instead, and most now called him Bill, and sometimes Willie. “Too hot over there,” said Heath. “And I don’t mean the weather. The Japs are probably swarming all over the place by now.”

“Well hell,” said Causton, “That’s what these damn 75s are for! What are we supposed to do in Australia?”

“I’ll tell you one thing they should do,” said Heath. “They ought to scrub this damn rust bucket down real good. It smells like hell!”

He pinched his nose, for the ship they were on had been carrying shipments of jute and copra from the Philippines for many months, and the residual stench was so bad that they call the ship “Stinking Old *Holbrook*.” But that would be the least of worries for Heath. Causton would also get his wish one day, but he would get to the Philippines in a very roundabout way, after years of hard fighting that would see him return there with the very man he was hoping to relieve, General Douglas MacArthur.

But first his ship would have to make the risky trip to Brisbane, not knowing that the French Pacific Squadron was going to be looking for them soon, and the altered history they were now sailing into would one day become known as the First Battle of the New Hebrides....

Chapter 12

When the convoy had first sailed from Hawaii, a pilot on board the Republic with a poet's last name for his first name, Byron Wilhite, wrote in his diary: "There's something about leaving that gets you... a feeling that creeps over you and, try as you may to down it, it remains to remind you that you may never see this place again. It's sort of like the feeling you get at New Year when, for a short moment amid all the gaiety and laughter of the party, you pause to reflect and realize that here is something slipping from you that can never be returned as it is."

That was life in a nutshell, a poetic muse that was akin to that made by J. D. Salinger when he wrote, "...all we do our whole lives through is go from one little piece of Holy Ground to the next."

Men aboard those ships had hailed from small towns all over the US, Texas, New York, and the Midwest. They had said their goodbyes to girlfriends, buddies and family, piled onto trains for the long trip to San Francisco, steamed out to Hawaii, and then slipped away into the wide empty sea. They crossed the equator where the old salts, the 'Shellbacks' who had been there once before, planned an elaborate initiation for the 'Pollywogs' making the journey for the first time. They smeared them with oil and grease, dunked them in vats of sea water, and otherwise subjected them to every indignity they could devise. But this would be nothing compared to the baptism by fire all these men would soon endure.

They had all sailed on to Fiji, an island paradise if ever there was one. Many had hoped that might be the end of their sea voyage, but their Holy Ground would lie elsewhere in this turn of events, and now they were slipping away from the pier yet again, leaving behind a place that could never be returned to them as it was, and their last moments of innocence and civility as they now went off to war. Every moment in life was like that, but some moments make you stand up and pay attention as they slip away, a last kiss, a goodbye, a heave to and out to sea moment that was heavily upon the men aboard old stinking *Holbrook* that day. They could hear the dolorous song of the Tahitian Maori farewell as they slipped away, and many never forgot it. They could feel in their hearts that they were crossing yet another frontier, the thin line of demarcation between the peaceful lives they had left behind, and the peculiar form of human insanity that was war.

Things started in a very ominous way, when one of the sea planes launched off the *Pensacola* went out later that morning, and never returned. That started the men talking, tightening the straps of their life jackets, and getting down into the hold for cases of ammo for those .50 caliber machine guns, which were soon bristling from all the ships in the convoy. They were the only guns that had ammo, and Bill Heath passed a moment thinking about all the rest of the stuff in those crates below as he came on deck, his broad shoulders draped with straps of MG rounds.

One hit from an enemy bomb, shell, or torpedo, and this old rust bucket will go up like fireworks, he thought. *Holbrook* had her guts stuffed with bombs and ammo, and her decks crawling with National Guardsmen.

The convoy was stretched out in a long line, with *Pensacola* in the van, leading the others in a zig-zag course to the south. The gunboat *Niagara* was bringing up the rear, last out of the harbor and lagging behind. A small steel hulled yacht of only 1000 tons, the boat could make no more than 16 knots, enough to keep up with the convoy easily enough, but not much good in her intended role as a sub chaser.

An enemy submarine would get the better of the little ship that day, the Japanese boat I-19, which was to have a particularly fruitful war record. The boat was supposed to be credited with the sinking of the US carrier *Wasp*, destroyer *O'Brien*, and would also put her lance into the side of the battleship *North Carolina*. On this day it would cut its teeth on the little *Niagara*, and when her distress call was received by Captain Frank L. Lowe on the *Pensacola*, it was far too late for the cruiser to do anything about it. The rumors spread that they were now being stalked by Japanese subs, and the men watched the mid day sea with fearful eyes, many pointing at possible periscopes that were never there, and even firing off their .50 caliber machineguns at them, which did little more than stir up the sea and relieve just a little tension on the boat. Somehow firing the guns was a great release, better than just sitting there on the open decks, watching and waiting.

The following morning December 12th, at a little after sunrise, an aircraft was spotted to the southwest. Captain Lowe hoped it might be his long lost seaplane, but as it lingered just out of reach of the cruiser's AA guns, he had the sinking feeling that the convoy had been spotted by the enemy.

"That had to come off another ship," he said to his XO. "Because it sure as hell didn't come from Fiji."

“What do you figure?”

“Could be off a Japanese cruiser out here somewhere, or even a French ship. Something tells me we should have waited for the Aussies to get here with their welcoming committee.” He was referring to the one bit of good news they had that day, when word came the Australians had dispatched a flotilla comprised of the cruisers *Canberra*, *Perth* and *Achilles*, sending them out to rendezvous with the convoy.

“Could it be off one of their ships?” asked the XO.

“Not likely. They’d notify us by signal if they were close enough to send that plane.”

Captain Lowe’s instincts were correct, for at that moment, the French Pacific Squadron under Vice Admiral Decoux was already twelve hours out of Noumea, and about 450 miles southeast of the *Pensacola*, and the French were now about to launch their first ever carrier borne air strike in history.

Aboard the carrier *Bearn*, the Admiral was watching the planes lining up on the flight deck, small bi-winged PL.7s that could carry a torpedo or a pair of 450 kg bombs. There were only nine aboard, but he also had 15 single seat LN.401 naval dive bombers, the only planes in that line to ever be built. They had decent range at 1200 kilometers, or about 648 nautical miles, and could be armed with 225kg bombs. Those planes would be escorted by four of his ten old Dewotine D.373 mono-wing fighters, each armed with a pair of Hotchkiss 13.2 MGs. All these planes were obsolete by 1941, with the dive bombers being the best of the lot.

Decoux had his sighting report in hand, and steamed another three hours, slowly closing the range. At a little after 12:00, he turned *Bearn* into the wind and put his fledgling strike wave aloft, with the range to the target at about 300 miles. The planes trundled off the deck, formed up overhead, and then fluttered off like a formation of moths from the last war, about to attempt something that had never been done by the French Navy.

Forty minutes later they had the *Pensacola* convoy in sight, and alarms were ringing on all the ships, sending the tense crews to man every machinegun they had managed to get out of those cargo holds. The war’s fifth carrier strike was now underway. The Japanese made three in their attack against Pearl Harbor and the *Lexington*, and the Americans had returned the favor once with planes off *Enterprise* and *Lexington*. As soon as Bill heath saw those planes, he knew the jig was up and his war was finally getting started.

He and Cliff Causton were on a machinegun mounted in the bow of the *Holbrook*, squinting up at the French planes and not knowing what to make of them. Captain Lowe on the *Pensacola* had other ideas, knowing trouble when he saw it, and he ordered his cruiser to open up with everything it had, which wasn't much, at 12:10. His ten 8 inch guns were not much good against an air attack, and he had only four 5-inch dual purpose AA guns. Those guns started puffing up rounds, but were not hitting much of anything. He might have been better served sending his float planes up to dog fight with the enemy, or by a few cases of those .50 caliber MGs that were now starting to fire from all the transport ships that had managed to get them rigged out.

The men on the 75s that had been lashed to the decks on the *Republic* ran their drill, looking as threatening as possible, but with no ammo to fire at the planes as they came in for their attack runs. The dive bombers came first, relatively slow and ponderous as they fell from above, even though the plane looked much faster than it was, with a pointed nose and sleek fuselage and canopy.

The inexperience of the French pilots showed, many with no more than one or two practice bombing drills under their belts. A few bombs fell near the *Republic*, spraying her decks with more seawater than shrapnel. One more fell right off the bow of *Holbrook*, and Cliff Causton whooped as he fired off his machinegun in reprisal, missing the swooping plane by an equal margin. He, too, had no training on that weapon. It was all new to the men on both sides, this game of war, and more theater in that first hot hour than anything else.

When the French torpedo planes came in, things changed. The pilots knew enough to come in groups of three so they could put down a spread of torpedoes. They got in low, braving the inaccurate machine gun fire and the 5-inchers on the *Pensacola*, but they made the mistake of trying to go after that ship instead of the much slower transports. Perhaps it was a point of honor, in that *Pensacola* was clearly a warship, built for this fight, while the transports seemed innocent victims and bystanders, in spite of the stream of .50 caliber bullets off the *Holbrook*, and the stream of invectives as the men shouted at the French planes, giving them the middle finger as they came in.

Pensacola was well out in front now, under attack, and putting on speed. One French PL.7 took enough of a near miss from one of those 5-inch guns to force the pilot to abandon his run, smoke trailing from his engine. The

other two in the first wave came in off the port bow, with three more off the starboard side, and they were going to get all five fish in the water. Captain Lowe was watching the attack, and decided to give his horse the wind.

“Ahead full!” he shouted, wanting to run right out of the steel V those torpedoes were making as they came at him. A speedy ship, the *Pensacola* responded quickly, able to run at 31 knots when necessary, as it was at that very moment. She was able to race on through, her aft deck crews cheering when they saw all five enemy torpedoes scudding through the cruiser’s foaming wake. The last three PL.7s tried their luck, with even worse results. They came in on the port side and fired a spread that Lowe easily avoided with a timely turn.

Their teeth pulled, the PL.7s turned for home, while the last of the dive bombers tried to return some of the machinegun bullets being fired at them off the *Holbrook*. There was a final exchange of fire, with a few enemy rounds tearing up the aft deck and wounding three men there, while the gunners tried to riddle the planes in return, hitting nothing much at all. Then it was over, the French batting zero in their first attack, and all planes heading home save one unlucky dive bomber and that single PL.7 torpedo plane that was downed by *Pensacola*.

As the men on *Holbrook* watched them go, they began to hoot and jeer, whistling them off like a tea kettle letting off steam in that tense moment. Bill Heath was braving the stench down in the hold to bring up more ammunition in case anything came back. He opened a fresh crate, and to his great surprise and delight, found it was filled with bottles of whiskey instead of ammunition. Smiling broadly, he grabbed an armful and went topside, and he and his mates had themselves a good little celebration after what they considered to be their first victory in the war that lay ahead.

Yet the battle was far from over. When the French planes made it back to the *Bearn*, Vice Admiral Decoux was most unhappy with the results. When he finally got a full report on the composition of the convoy, he was incensed. Most of his pilots had gone after *Pensacola*, which sped away, dodging bombs and torpedoes all the while.

“You idiots!” he exclaimed. “We lost two planes, and another three on landing, and we have nothing to show for it. So we attack again, only this time use your heads and go after those transport ships!”

He reasoned he would have plenty of daylight left to rearm his planes and strike again, and the entire task force began to put on speed. This time he

would send only the strike planes, leaving his ten fighters aboard, with three flying CAP.

But Captain Lowe had sent out an SOS the moment that first attack came in, and it was heard by Captain James Hansen on the *Antietam*. His task force had left Davao days ago and swept down the coast of New Guinea, through the Bismarck Barrier and into the Solomon Sea. He pushed down between the Island of Naunoga and Vanua Lava in the French New Hebrides group, intending to approach Fiji from the northwest.

The Americans were about 300 miles from the action when he got news of the attack, immediately ordering all ahead full. His sleek hybrid battlecarriers churned up the sea, capable of making 33 knots, though he held his speed to 30. The cruiser *Houston* could easily keep pace, a ship that was to be called "The Galloping Ghost of the Java Coast." That ship had stayed with his task force, along with the destroyer *Alden*, while the remaining destroyers escorting the seaplane tender *Langley* were left behind and bound for Port Moresby to refuel. *Alden* was supposed to have been in Tarakan on Borneo, lingering there for a little added security, but now it would go rushing into battle with the hybrids.

"Get hold of Gates on the *Shiloh*," said Hansen as they passed through the 250 range mark. "Tell him to get 'em up and turn 'em over. The Japs must have a carrier out here somewhere."

Those initial reports had not clarified the situation. Hansen knew *Pensacola* was under attack, but no mention had been made of the French. It wasn't until he had his planes on deck, that follow up signals from *Pensacola* enlightened him.

"So now we're at war with the French? They'll have to be coming out of Noumea, and if they hit *Pensacola* an hour ago, then they'd have to be right about here." He fingered the map, his index finger falling right on the spot where Admiral Decoux was cursing and organizing his second strike. "Alright, let's get all 24 strike planes in the air, and half the fighters, that will leave us 12 fighters here on CAP."

He was going to send 36 planes at the French, twelve SBDs, 12 TBDs and 12 Wildcats. While they were still inter-war models, they were head and shoulders above what *Bearn* was carrying, and his pilots were much better trained. They were raised and spotted quickly on the small but efficient flight deck, which was angled out slightly so the planes would take off on an angle of about 15 degrees from the bow. The men had heard what had happened at

Pearl, and knew the fate of the *Lexington*. Now it was time for a little payback, though their only regret was that they were not going up against the Japanese.

The strike was up and on its way, arriving near the suspected position of the enemy task force at mid-day, just as *Bearn* was spotting her refueled and rearmed planes for their second attack. When the warning came in of enemy planes, Admiral Decoux was shocked. Where could they be coming from? He was well away from any island, and from all intelligence, the only American carriers were far to the east at Pearl Harbor, or already at the bottom of the sea.

His disillusionment aside, the French began to put up AA fire just as the SBDs tipped over into their final dive. Down they came, the Wildcats right behind them to look for enemy fighters. One of those planes was being piloted by a man who should have been on the *Lexington* that day, if it were still afloat. His name was Butch O'Hare, who would get 7 kills early in the war after training with flight group leader Jimmy Thach. He was transferred into Davao when the *Antietam* needed a replacement pilot, and now he found himself in a perfect place to start notching his belt.

O'Hare saw that there were only a handful of enemy planes up, the old Dewoitine D.371s. The rest were just starting to take off, and he called out to his mates that they had caught the French napping, as usual. The six D.371s up on CAP never even tried to go after those SBDs, fluttering off to the north where O'Hare could get a good crack at them. He was on the tail of one with a good burst that riddled its feathers right from the start. Before it was over he would shoot two of those planes down, needing only five more to equal his wartime tally in Fedorov's history. It would not be any great accomplishment if you just looked at the numbers. The top American Ace of the war, Richard L. Bong, would get 40 kills, and even this would put him far down on the list, which was largely dominated by German pilots. Eric Hartmann would get 352 confirmed kills, and the Germans would stack nearly a hundred Aces at the top of the heap. But here, in these early days of the war, those two kills O'Hare notched counted for a great deal. They were tiny little victories where they were much needed, grains of sand in the war, but enough to start an avalanche.

Meanwhile, the Dauntless pilots were pushing their SBDs into the final leg of the dive, and one was going to put a 500 pound bomb right on the flight deck of the *Bearn*, just aft of the tall narrow island. Admiral Decoux

stared at the hit, seeing it blow away the central crane for hoisting planes up on deck. The tall white sea spray of several more near misses shook his nerves, and then another 500 pound bomb crashed into the carrier about 50 feet from the stern. That one was the fatal blow, for it would penetrate the thin 25mm flight deck, plunge through the spaces below and start a raging fire that soon threatened to involve the main propulsion shafts.

In the chaos that ensued, the French simply forgot all about their launch operations. They managed to get 9 planes in the air, and the Wildcats were all over them, shooting four more down, and forcing another two torpedo planes to fly so low that they ended up ditching. Three got away. But unable to go back to the *Bearn*, they simply headed out to sea.

Admiral Decoux would see his days as a carrier commander come to a swift end, and he boiled with anger to think of what had just happened to France's only carrier. But he still had a significant force in hand, with those cruisers and destroyers. The flak they were putting up was considerable, and enough to drive off most of the 12 TBDs that came in, but not before one got a torpedo in the water that stuck it to the French carrier right amidships. That sealed the fate of the *Bearn*, and Admiral Decoux knew it when he felt the jarring impact and saw the tall white sea spray wash up and over his flight deck. Try as he might to save her, he would now lose the ship, and be forced to transfer his flag to the nearest cruiser, *Jean de Arc*.

Then something happened that no one expected at that time and place, not even the French. A squadron of three white winged Japanese Zeroes came diving into the scene, swooping down like falcons to attack the American TBDs as they formed up to make the return leg to their battlecarriers. The First Battle of the New Hebrides was about to enter Round 3.

Part V

Rooks' Gambit

“No Price is too great for the scalp of the enemy King.”

— **Koblentz**

Chapter 13

They had come off the light carrier *Hiyo*, which had been stationed at Truk with her sister ship the *Junyo* to support planned amphibious landings in the Gilberts and French New Hebrides. They had once been the luxury passenger liners *Izumo Maru* and *Kashiwara Maru*, laid down at Nagasaki in 1938, but from their very inception the designers were paid a handsome subsidy to build in features that would allow for an easy conversion to an aircraft carrier. It was all part of Japan's sleight of hand before the war, a plan to quickly produce even more carriers should they be needed.

With this in mind, they were designed with double hulls, and large internal areas used as dining halls and ballrooms were positioned exactly where the navy might want its hangers and flight deck elevators. As it happened, both were purchased by the Japanese Navy before the war, now commissioned five months earlier than they might have appeared. They were very useful ships for the purpose in mind, a good escort for amphibious task forces where their 25 knot speed would serve well enough, and they could carry 48 combat planes and a number of float planes as well.

Junyo was now far to the north, escorting a Japanese SNLF battalion out to the Gilberts, and *Hiyo* had been assigned the mission of escorting in the crack Ichiki Regiment under Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki, to Noumea to reinforce the battalion that had landed there on December 4th. The Colonel had his name first entered into the history books as a Major in China, when he had been conducting a night training session with his men firing blanks. The Chinese across the nearby border thought an attack was imminent, fired artillery, and that night one of Ichiki's men failed to return to the barracks. Thinking the man had been captured, the intrepid Major formed up his battalion and went storming into Wanping, the first hostile act of the war against China that began in 1934.

Now Ichiki was a Colonel, and the men on the transports were not going to be shooting blanks, though this was not to be an assault mission. He had the 28th regiment of Kuma Heidan, the 7th Infantry, otherwise known as the Army's 'Bear Division.' It was called that because the unit had gained most of its experience in the so called "Siberian Intervention," occupying Vladivostok and Primorskiy Province and also fighting in Manchuria. Ichiki's regiment had been moved to Truk for a possible attack on Midway Island, but that was not yet scheduled, and so it was now being sent south to

Noumea.

The small task force was comprised of *Hiyo*, five transports, the destroyers *Isuzu* and *Yura*, and the heavy cruiser *Chokai*. The latter had been pulled from the Malaya operation and sent out to Truk to put just a little muscle into the operations group there, which was otherwise quite lean. They would be operating in waters that would be deemed safe for some time, and so battle was not on the mind of Captain Beppu Akitomo as he took his 'Flying Hawk' south to what he thought would be nothing more than a quick ferry mission. He was to offload Ichiki's troops, and leave most of his aircraft at Noumea as well before returning to Truk to be re-provisioned.

Hiyo had 18 D3A Val dive bombers, 18 B5N Kate torpedo bombers, and 12 A6M Zeroes, with three of them up that day on a wide area search sweep. They heard the radio traffic rising like the unexpected swell of a storm, and homed in to see what was going on. *Shotai* leader Teneko Tadashi was eager to get into the war, and the sound of a rollicking battle on his radio, with heated calls in both French and English, pulled his planes in like sharks to blood in the water. They saw the American SBDs and fell on them, gunning one out of the sky in that first pass and scattering the rest.

The Wildcats that had accompanied the strike had been chasing off the last of the planes that struggled into the air off the *Bearn*. The hapless French pilots did not know where they were going, and simply fled away from the scene on any heading. By the time the US fighters realized they had uninvited guests, those three Zeroes had each feasted on one of the SBDs. The Americans reformed and raced to get to the scene of the battle, the twelve planes being enough to discourage Teneko when he saw them coming. As much as he had every desire to dance with the American fighters, he knew that this many planes were confirmation that an enemy carrier was somewhere close at hand, and that became his highest priority. So he quickly ordered his *Shotai* to break off and follow him due south to mask the real location of the *Hiyo*, which was now steaming exactly 294 miles west of the battle zone.

Teneko flashed the warning back to *Hiyo*—*enemy planes—possible carrier close by!* He could not provide a location, but he had carefully noted the course of the SBDs when they had found them, and surmised from this that the Americans might be to the north. So with plenty of fuel left in his long legged Zeroes, he led his planes back north again to see if he could stealthily trail the American formation home.

For their part, the US strike leader had radioed back to *Antietam* that they had just mixed it up with three Jap fighters, and were now inbound, and with three confirmed hits on the French flat top.

This was a real surprise for Captain James Hansen. "Enemy fighters? Out here?" he folded his arms, looking at Cliff Howard, the balding XO of the ship with a bulldog neck and heavy shoulders.

"Must have come out of Noumea," said Howard. "For my money, we ought to get down there and give them a good pasting, right along with the Frogs. Let's bust up their little tea party with Tojo's boys before it gets started."

"Easy does it, Cliff," said Hansen. He was a tall, straight backed navy Captain, near the top of his class, and with just enough of a cavalry officer in him to have landed this posting to *Antietam*. Yet for him, orders were orders. He had been sent to find and protect the *Pensacola* Convoy, and that was what he was fixed on doing.

"This signal says those Zeroes broke off to the south. There's nothing down there but open sea, so maybe they did come out of Noumea. That said, we've got to link up with *Pensacola* ASAP. We gave it to that French carrier pretty good. As soon as we recover the boys, I'm moving east."

That was going to take *Antietam* and *Shiloh* directly away from his unseen enemy. The *Hiyo* group had come down through the Solomons, and was right between the long island of New Caledonia and the lower New Hebrides, a string of four islands, Efate, Erromango, Tanna and Aneityum. You could draw a line between the Japanese and American carriers now, and it would run right over the second island in that chain, Erromango, largely uninhabited and with no history to speak of in the original war.

Teneko's fighters followed the Americans just long enough to get a good heading, carefully watching his fuel diminish as they went. Yet he persisted until he finally saw them starting to descend. There, ahead through a stand of puffy white clouds, he clearly saw what he was looking for, two enemy carriers. Elated, he noted his position as best he could, and turned off to head home, now flying slightly southwest. He would find Erromango dead ahead, and knew that he could use it again to lead him right toward the enemy carriers.

Aboard *Hiyo*, Captain Beppu could hardly believe the news. He knew the Americans were thought to have four carriers here in the Pacific. Two had been spotted and engaged near Pearl Harbor, and these could certainly not be

those ships, because the *Kido Butai* had put one of them on the bottom of the sea. So these must be the other two carriers, hiding out here and probably trying to get to Australia. It was just his luck that he had discovered them, and though he was outnumbered two to one, or so he believed, he would now get his chance for a big kill.

In fact, the odds were fairly even, for the Americans would now have 44 planes between their two hybrids, losing those three SBDs and one Wildcat that had developed engine trouble and had to ditch. Beppu immediately ordered his strike planes to make ready, and now the race was on to get those planes into the air as soon as possible.

By the time Teneko's three thirsty Zeroes returned, the strike wave was being spotted on deck. He took his plane in, leaping from the cockpit to run to the *Hiyo* strike leader, Lt. Zenji Abe. "Two carriers!" He pointed stiffly to the east, right off the bow of the ship, which was now turning into the wind. "All you have to do is find the big island out there, and fly right over top of it! But be sure you save something for me. I'll be right on your tail as soon as they refuel my plane."

Lieutenant Zenji Abe was eager to go. He had come over from the Fleet Carrier *Soryu*, thinking to make a move to the Fleet Flagship *Akagi*, and was disappointed when he first learned he would be sent to the *Hiyo* instead. He would not be with his old ship in the Pearl Harbor attack, and this posting to *Hiyo* seemed a lackluster affair. Yet now he would get his chance to shine. He would not get his day over the Devil's Island, as the Japanese called Oahu, but today he would give the Devil his due.

His 18 Vals had good range, nearly 800 nautical miles, and it was only a reported 300 to the enemy task force. That meant he could expend fuel he might use to travel 200 nautical miles over the target, which was more than enough to deliver his bombs to the enemy. The Kates behind him had even better range, so he knew they would make a good attack. But there were only six Zeroes along, and Teneko would not be able to make good on his promise to follow when he was told his *Shotai* would refuel and then stand on defensive CAP over the *Hiyo*.

On the long flight out, Abe put his mind into a calming meditation, but when they finally spotted the dark silhouette of Erromango, he could not help the rising adrenaline in his chest. Cruising at a little over 140 knots, it took Abe a little over two hours before he found what he was looking for.

The American carriers had moved east as Captain Hansen ordered. Even

as Teneko was landing on *Hiyo* with his news, the US strike wave was being recovered. In those two hours, the service crews below decks worked like maniacs to turn those planes over and get them spotted again. Yet Hansen had no idea what to do with them. Even if he presumed there was a Japanese carrier around, he did not yet know where it was, and his only suspicion put it south of the French Fleet in his mind. The thought that the Japanese would come from the west, right over the line of the southern Hebrides, never entered his mind.

At 15:00 hours, Hansen had considered mounting yet another strike on the French, but hesitated, hoping the seaplanes off the *Houston* would tell him whether the enemy was persisting in an easterly course towards *Pensacola*. That was not happening, for Admiral Decoux had had quite enough after *Bearn* took those hits, and he was nursing a fruitless hope that he could get the carrier back to Noumea. So the French were just hovering, and *Houston*'s spotters confirmed that.

"What's your call," said XO Cliff Howard. "You going to give it to the Frogs on the other cheek now? We can make sure we get that carrier, and after that, get after those French cruisers."

Hansen liked the fire in his eyes, and so he nodded, ordering the planes to be spotted again for a final strike. "This time we better load up on fighters," he said. "Just in case those Japs have more Zeroes out there. Tell Murray to get all his Wildcats up first."

That was a fortuitous order, for when Abe's strike came in they were surprised to find the skies already crowded with American planes over the two carriers. 18 of the 24 Wildcats had already taken off, forming up like a swarm of hornets over the two fast carriers. Behind them the strike planes were following them up, climbing slowly into the sky.

The seeming calm of all that open sea and sky was soon a wild swirl of planes. Abe was determined to put in his attack, and he led his Vals gallantly forward against very steep odds. The Wildcats had been forewarned by the planes returning from the strike, and they figured they had a score to settle should they find any more Zeroes holding hands with the French. This time they found much more than they expected.

The six Zeroes flying escort raged in, boldly challenging the American formation, though they would be outnumbered three to one. Yet at this stage of the war, they were among the best pilots in the Japanese Navy, even on a secondary light carrier like the *Hiyo*, and the planes they were flying were

second to none. They downed two Wildcats before the numbers began to matter and they were more often forced to defensive maneuvers after that initial fitful attack. Yet they had two thirds of the Wildcats in a wild fight, leaving no more than six to go after Abe's strike planes.

Flight leader Calvin Murray was one of them, and he cut a path to get at those Vals just as they were tipping over, following one down and forcing it to break off its attack run and go defensive. The others persisted, 17 dive bombers coming down to churn up the seas with their 500 pound bombs. Six went after *Houston*, putting one bomb right amidships on the Galloping Ghost. The other eleven focused on the carriers, but the Wildcats got two more on the way down. That left nine Vals to put in that attack, and one put a bomb right beside *Antietam*, the spray of shrapnel and seawater raking the hull and one of the 5-inch guns there. The second was lucky enough to score a direct hit, but it was well forward of the flight deck, landing right on the number two 6-inch gun turret.

The resulting explosion looked worse than it was, for there was just enough armor there to protect the ship from taking serious harm, even though that gun was certainly put out of action. But now the Kates were swooping low, bearing down on *Antietam*, which seemed to be pulling in most of the enemy attacks. Captain Rooks was cruising just off the starboard side of the carrier in *Houston*, his cruiser throwing everything it had at the enemy, and he was about to make history, and pose a question to every new academy recruit for the next sixty years.

Chapter 14

The Galloping Ghost was a beautiful ship when it first sailed in dress whites. It had a lovely clipper bow, with two big triple 8-inch gun turrets right behind it, and a third turret aft. A tall tripod mainmast, that looked much like those on the old American battleships, rose high above the bridge, doubling the height of the ship well above the two stacks, and there was another small tripod mast right behind the aft turret. Now she sailed in Haze Grey war paint, her sleek bow cutting through the whitecaps as she put on speed.

In better days, the ship had hosted President Roosevelt on a long Pacific cruise before the war, attended the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, but now she was rigged for battle, with four new quad 1.1 caliber AA cannons installed just before the war. Those guns opened up on the Kates, along with all the 5-inch 130mm AA guns on the starboard side of the ship, and eight .50 caliber machineguns. Their fire had been ineffective against the dive bombers, but with barrels depressed, *Houston* was throwing out a hail of steel at the oncoming enemy planes.

Torpedo planes died at an average kill rate of 30% to 50% in the early war, but the Japanese were coming in very fast, much faster than the American gunners expected. This high speed run was possible due to the unique technology of the Type-91, and that would save all but three that were downed by defensive fire, one in a tumultuous cartwheel when its wing hit the choppy seas. Three more had been harried off by a group of four Wildcats, and that left a dozen in the attack, all getting fish in the water. Of these, four were ill timed, and two others skipped on the ocean when their pilots came in just a little too low. But the last six were running true in a wide spread.

Captain Rooks saw the *Antietam* pull a hard right turn to port, slightly ahead, and knew that if he did the same he might avoid the leading torpedoes. But in his judgment, if he did that they would plow right into the *Antietam*, for he did not think the carrier was nimble enough to turn where it needed to be. In that hard moment a cruel calculus ran through his mind. Should he save his cruiser, leaving a good chance that the carrier would be hit?

Aboard *Antietam*, Captain Hansen was on the weather deck with his bulldog, Lieutenant Commander Cliff Howard, who pointed at the *Houston*

with a growl. “God damn! This is going to be close. Why doesn’t he turn?”

Hansen knew why.

Seconds later they saw the tall splashes that told the story. Rooks and the *Houston* had taken the fall. In that split second the Captain had simply ordered steady as she goes, his jaw set. His cruiser had already taken a 500 pound bomb, with damage in that attack that was far more serious than the one that took out the number two turret on *Antietam*. And though he had violated his primary duty as a Captain to see to the safety of his ship and crew, he saved the *Antietam* that day, for those torpedoes were going to hit her for sure if *Houston* turned.

Each of those Type 91s would put a 204kg warhead into *Houston*, and that would end her career long before she ever would earn her nickname. Her sides were ripped open, and the water flooded in. While it helped douse the fire amidships from that bomb hit, the flooding could not be controlled. *Houston* would die in what the Navy training schools would later call “Rooks’ Gambit,” but that Rook had protected the Queen in this deadly chess game at sea, and the planes off that queen had skewered the enemy King.

The Russian chess player Koblentz once said that no price was too great for the scalp of the enemy King. The men who went into the water that day took little solace from that, but their sacrifice was going to make a great difference in the months ahead.

Three separate carrier based task forces had now each put in attacks, one after another. The French attack had suffered from the liability of their obsolete planes and inexperienced pilots, the Americans had hit them back hard and knocked France right out of the war, at least insofar as carrier operations would be concerned, and now the Japanese had come to their aid and hurt the Americans in turn.

Antietam had been hit, but her flight deck was not involved, and she could still launch whatever she had left. *Shiloh* had been completely unscratched, along with destroyer *Alden*, shunned by the Japanese pilots. There were still three French planes out there somewhere, each one running alone on a different heading. Two eventually made it back to Noumea, but one ornery man, Captain Louis Delfino, had a crazy idea. He had flown for the Vichy Squadron at Dakar, then mustered out to French Indochina where he found himself available when *Bearn* arrived at Saigon. Fascinated by the prospect of becoming a carrier pilot, he persuaded the ship’s Captain to let him train, and he was the one man who would put that training to good use

that day.

Not knowing the fate of the *Bearn* when he sped away, Captain Delfino took the same heading he had flown earlier, and it led him right back to the *Pensacola* convoy. When he got there, he kept looking over his shoulder for company, but found himself completely alone. Had his mates been with him, the flack would have been fairly thick, but as it was, he was able to line up on one of the transports in an almost leisurely fashion, low and slow.

At one point Captain Lowe on the *Pensacola* thought he might be looking at his lost seaplane, as the resemblance was very close at range. Then he spied the torpedo slung below the belly of Delfino's plane, and sounded general quarters.

He was a little too late. The men on *Holbrook* were quicker, their .50 caliber machineguns opening up with a restless chatter. The men hadn't seen a thing for well over three hours since that first attack, and they thought they had licked their enemy. For the most part that was true—all but one. The plane was coming right in on the water, not aimed at *Holbrook*, but at the ship right behind her, the *Admiral Halstead*, with those 9,000 drums of high octane Avgas. Delfino got his fish in the water, it ran true, and the resulting explosion was the loudest sound to be heard on those waters for decades.

Cliff Causton, was on the bow manning his gun when it happened, along with Willie Heath. The two men were almost blown right off the ship by the blast wave, and the fireball was big enough that portions of deck mounted cargo on the aft of the *Holbrook* ignited, forcing the stunned crew to scramble for water hoses. As for the *Admiral Halstead*, when the shocked crewmen peered through the smoke and roiling flame, they could see nothing of the ship at all, and then a rain of hot metal began to fall all around the convoy line. The ship had literally been blown to ten thousand pieces, and not a single man aboard survived.

There, too, went all the aviation fuel for the P-40s and A-24s crated aboard the *Blomfintien* and on the *Meigs*. The French had salvaged a measure of honor, with just enough of a spike of revenge to put some steel into Admiral Decoux when Captain Delfino radioed back with the news of his lucky hit. The Admiral was delighted, wagging his finger at every man on the bridge of his sinking carrier, and telling them that when they got safely off the ship, and onto those cruisers, that this battle was far from over. He also had the radio operator tell Delfino that there was no point in trying to get back to the *Bearn*, she would be gone before he got there.

The Captain had already flown 200 miles to make his stunning kill, and now he reasoned that he might have just enough fuel to make landfall somewhere—in Fiji. Those islands were about another 200 miles ahead of him, and any friendly ground behind him was well beyond his range. So that is what he did, barely making it to Fiji where he ditched his plane in the surf just off the southern coast. He was soon found by members of the local Fiji Battalion, to whom he promptly surrendered with a stiff salute, his private little war over for the moment. Later he would cross the line and join the French Normandie-Niemen Squadron to fight the Germans in Russia.

* * *

Antietam and *Shiloh* were in a quandary now as Captain Hansen tried to decide whether he should launch that second wave as planned against the French, or try to look for the Japanese.

“Those planes came in from the southwest,” he said to Cliff Howard, “but we don’t really know where the Japs are. If they’re more than 300 miles out, we won’t be able to get at them. Hell, we can barely hit the French from here, as I’ve been running east for the last hour.”

“Bird in the hand,” said his XO. “We know where the Frogs are, just like you say.”

“Suppose the Japanese come at us again?”

“Then leave all the Wildcats here. Hell, the French don’t have anything that will bother our boys. We busted them up pretty bad the first time out.”

“I don’t know,” said Hansen. “I don’t like piling it on the second stringers when the A team is out there gunning for us.”

“Well, hell then,” said Howard. “We can’t very well run off east now with *Houston* going down. There’s 1100 men out there and the *Alden* can’t pull but a hundred out of the water. We’ve got to hold station here until we get those men safely aboard. So let’s get after the Japs.” He slapped his fist in his palm to emphasize the point, and Hansen gave him a nod.

It was going to be a long shot, but he would now launch everything he had left, eight SBDs and eleven TBDs, along with half the fighters, leaving him with ten he could hold on combat air patrol during the recovery operation. So he was sending 29 planes out this time, on a heading that followed the Japanese point of withdrawal. Along the way, some of the escorting Zeroes realized the Americans were behind them, and radioed

ahead to warn the *Hiyo* they were coming. Then they broke off and went back to try and bust up the American formation, like hawks falling on a flock of geese. There were only four left, but they kept things hot and busy for twenty minutes, fighting a rearguard action. One of the TBDs took a wing hit and lost enough fuel to force it to return to *Shiloh*. The Wildcats eventually drove the four intrepid Japanese pilots off, or so they believed. In truth, the Japanese were low on fuel and had to break off the action, racing ahead to rejoin the strike planes approaching *Hiyo*.

Six more Zeroes would be waiting over the Japanese task force when the Americans finally got there. Lieutenant Commander Murray put on speed, racing ahead of the strike planes now as he led the fighters in, but this time it was even odds, with ten Zeroes against an equal number of Wildcats. It's been said that there are two kinds of fighter pilots—one that goes out to get kills every time he flies, and the rest, who secretly fear they will be the ones in the crosshairs when they fly. Jake Murray was the first kind, and he would personally put streams of hot lead into two enemy Zeroes, though he was amazed at how many others twisted away when he thought he had a good shot.

Unfortunately, the rest of his Wildcats were filled with the other kind of fighter pilots that day, young, inexperienced men, seeing their first real combat in a place they never thought they would have to fight. The Japanese were going to get six kills in that dogfight, the Wildcats claiming three, the pair Murray got, and one other that had to splash when it finally ran out of fuel.

When the strike planes got there, the combined flak from the *Hiyo*, her four destroyers, and the heavy cruiser *Chokai* was fairly thick. But the US got just a little payback as the sun began to fall. Matoba Shigehiro, Chief Engineer of *Hiyo*, was going to be a busy man that day. One of the American dive bombers put its bomb right on target, in the aft section of the ship, just behind the rear elevator. It took out a deck mounted AA gun there, blasted right on through to the deck below to destroy a boat, and kept right on going into the innards of the ship, where it blew into the engine compartments. Casualties were heavy, and *Hiyo* saw her speed quickly fall off to just 16 knots. She was now walking wounded, able to still launch and recover planes, but not nimble enough to dodge the torpedoes off those TBDs.

No one ever gave a passing thought to going after the slow moving Japanese transports. The Americans had made the same mistake the French

pilots had made when they first found the *Pensacola* Convoy. They saw that Japanese carrier and went after it with single minded or perhaps myopic determination. So the Ichiki Regiment would get to Noumea, and that was going to mean trouble and tears for US war planners from that day forward.

Out of the ten Avengers that had started the run on *Hiyo*, flak got two, and the Zeroes two more. That left six pilots pulling the stick to get their fish into the water, and one was going to get his hit, Ensign Earl Kincaid, a young buck from Texas who thought flying his TBD was just like breaking in a good horse. The other US pilots heard him *yee haw* when he saw that fish run smack into the target, right on the port side of the carrier, about 50 feet forward of the island.

Earl the Pearl had scored a hit, and Captain Beppu Akitomo cursed when he felt the torpedo striking his ship... but, to his great relief, it did not explode.

Their fight over, the American planes pulled away, got themselves back into a group, and headed northeast. Six Avengers, eight SBDs and four Wildcats came home, and Hansen told them all to land on the *Shiloh*. He waited nervously on the Bridge of *Antietam* for the next two hours, watching the recovery operation as *Houston* finally rolled over and went down. They got most everyone off, but 186 would not survive that ordeal in the sea, most casualties from the moment the bomb and those two torpedoes struck the ship.

Captain Rooks would face a board of enquiry when he eventually was flown back to Pearl Harbor, but Hansen came to his defense, telling him it was just flat out bravery under fire that had saved his battlecarrier that day. At that moment, America needed heroes. So instead of a rebuke for not turning away and saving his ship, the captain got a medal, and 'Rooks' Gambit' would be a question put to every young officer in the training schools for the next three years when they were all asked to weigh in as to what they would have done.

He had figured heavily in the outcome of that battle, for *Antietam* and *Shiloh* both made it safely east to find the stricken *Pensacola* Convoy. They had been too late to save the *Admiral Halstead* and those 9,000 drums of high octane Avgas, but what was left of that small air group would come in very handy when the French Admiral Decoux got a hair up his ass and decided he was going to continue on east and avenge the loss of his prized carrier.

Far to the south, the last element of this complex battle was coming up

from Brisbane, a three ship task force led by the heavy cruiser *Canberra*, under Captain Harold Bruce Farncomb, RAN. With him were Captain Philip Boyer-Smith on the Australian light cruiser *Perth*, and Captain Hugh Barnes on New Zealand light cruiser *Achilles*. It seemed anyone could get in on this bar fight, and the arrival of that task force on the scene would now add ships from two more countries to the mix.

Hiyo, however, was out of the action. Captain Beppu decided the best thing he could do was get his wounded carrier to Noumea, where he was to have delivered his planes in any case. Getting the Ichiki Regiment there safely was his first responsibility, and so he turned away, recovering his planes and heading south with a standing patrol of Zeroes overhead the whole long way.

All that night the ships that still had any fight in them would close on the position of the *Pensacola* Convoy. The following morning the final chapter of the battle would be written, with the French fleet facing off against those three Kiwi cruisers, the US heavy cruiser *Pensacola* and destroyer *Alden*. *Antietam* and *Shiloh* would make all the difference in the world, even though their combined air wing could now only put up 28 of the original 48 planes, and most of those were Wildcats.

Admiral Decoux thought he had the upper hand with his four cruisers and four destroyers against just five enemy ships, but those two hybrid battlecarriers were just over the horizon, unseen and determined to stay in the fight.

Chapter 15

The French had learned much from Captain Louis Delfino, and they learned it very quickly. The battle they had just fought taught them that the pomp and protocol of the military, its seeming civility with fresh pressed uniforms, stiff armed salutes, and all due respect, was nothing more than a mask. Behind that mask lay the violence inherent in the machinery and weapons they commanded, and the end of their use was inevitably death—death of a plane, a ship, a man.

War was not dashing, nor gallant, nor the display of honor. It was simply a carefully controlled, yet murderous craft of destruction. Seeing the *Bearn* ravaged by bombs and fire, and finally gutted by that torpedo, had shaken Admiral Decoux's resolve, as it might any man. But seeing what Louis Delfino did, a single man alone in his plane, had forged the steel of the Admiral's resolve, at least that night, as darkness descended on his task force.

He learned where the American convoy was, and steamed hard for it all night long. At dawn, he thought he might see the tall charcoal smoke from that action, but the last fading remnant of the violence that had ended the wartime career of the *Admiral Halstead* had become nothing more than a muddy smear that slowly turned ocher in the lightening sky.

The *Pensacola* Convoy, had turned due south, thinking to evade any further enemy harassment, but Decoux had seaplanes off his cruisers up that morning, searching the rosy dawn. It was not long until they found the convoy, but soon after that report, another came in with news of the Australian led squadron to the southwest. The Admiral now had to decide whether or not to go in after that convoy, or first deal with the constable on the beat, and in doing so he took his own advice as he gave it to his pilots after that ill fated first strike.

He decided to ignore the three ships rushing to the scene, and instead put on speed, hell bent to get at the Americans. He was on their horizon at 08:00... but so was *Antietam* with its sidekick *Shiloh*. They were just about to make their rendezvous with the convoy when the uninvited guests arrived, and a Wildcat up in early morning search had seen the French coming. Captain Hansen and his growling XO Cliff Howard had every plane left spotted and in the air twenty minutes later, and Decoux looked up to see them coming, his ardor for battle suddenly dampened again.

Only six Dauntless dive bombers and an equal number of Avengers were flyable, but Hansen had ordered six more Wildcats to go up with bombs strapped to their wings. If the Japanese showed up again, they could always jettison the ordnance for a dogfight, but by now, the *Hiyo* group was far to the west, heading for Noumea with that precious troop convoy.

Down they came, six intrepid dive bombers with a hunger for revenge. They had never thought that France would be their enemy out here. In fact, *Antietam* had once called on French ports in these waters, and received a warm welcome. But seeing what they had done to the *Admiral Halstead* had fired up the pilots, and coming off a good round with the Japanese, they were ready for a fight here.

Down they came, the first flight lining up on the French cruiser *Emile Bertin*, and one of the three scored a direct hit that put a forward turret out of action. The second flight went after the Cruiser *Lamotte-Picquett*, bettering their brothers by putting a 500 pounder right amidships, and another near miss that rolled the ship heavily to starboard. Decoux ordered a hard turn, but looked to see six more planes coming in like a line of heavy cavalry, low on the water.

They were lined up well, and all six would get torpedoes off. Unfortunately, half would fail due to mechanical problems that would plague American torpedoes for months at the onset of the war. Of the three that ran true, two would find enemy hulls. Destroyer *Fougueux* would not survive the hit it took, nearly blowing off the small ship's bow. Then the light cruiser *Emil Bertin*, her bridge shrouded in heavy smoke from the bomb hit forward, could not see to maneuver out of harm's way. The cruiser took a damaging hit in the aft quarter of the ship that cut her speed in half and caused her to quickly fall out of the French battle line.

Decoux now looked to see his brave charge thinned out by the loss of those two cruisers and a destroyer. He still had *Suffren* and *Jean De Arc*, and the destroyers *Frondeur*, *Lansquenet*, and *Le-Hardi*, a handful of ships that now represented most of what he could command by way of a navy for the foreseeable future. He did not yet know how bad the damage was, but he did know one thing, those planes could land, rearm, and continue to stalk him for hours.

The Wildcats wheeled about, now delivering their bombs to the sea for the most part, as not a man among all those fighter pilots had any training against fast moving naval targets. Flight leader Murray straddled *Jean de Arc*

with his two small bombs, rattling Decoux further, and impressing upon him just how severe the loss of the carrier *Bearn* had been. He could see, in this brief encounter, the same lesson that was being learned by navies all across the world. This was a different time, a new era at sea, a different war. The days where the battleship reigned supreme were coming to an end. It was aircraft that ruled the skies over the seas now, and nothing passed there save by their leave.

The Admiral's resolve wavered, and then, dark on the horizon, he saw the threatening silhouette of the American heavy cruiser *Pensacola*, like a mother bear out to savage the wolves that had dared to attack her cubs. Bright fire rippled through the dawn, and the long arc of those 8-inch shells hissed and whooshed in, the opening salvo surprisingly accurate. The Admiral's knuckles were white on the binnacle as the tall geysers dolloped up from the sea off his port forward quarter.

Before being pronounced Commander in Chief of the French Far East Navy, the Admiral had commanded little more than a sloop and frigate, in the early 1920s, with a brief posting to a ship of the line in 1929. The fact was, he had little idea as to how to properly fight a naval battle, and when the action opened at 18,000 yards, the tall white spray of *Pensacola's* very accurate gunfire knocked the *Louis Delfino* out of him in five minutes. It was one thing to give scolding orders to his pilots, but quite another to follow them himself. The simple fact of the matter was this—he had no idea what he was doing, and the American ships out there did.

He turned when he should have kept steady on, and he ordered his ships to fire when the range was beyond their means. He insisted his last three destroyers remain at the back of his battle line, thinking them no more than a nuisance. Then, when *Canberra* showed up with *Perth* and *Achilles*, he lost his nerve completely, finally employing the one thing his ships could use to prevent an even greater disaster than the one he already had on his hands—their speed. The Admiral turned about, looked for the nearest empty horizon, and sped away with his feathers thoroughly ruffled, and his wounded pride unhealed.

The Aussies came in, the big cruiser *Canberra* sighting on the wounded *Emil Bertin*. Three salvos out they saw the bright flash of yet another explosion, and then, strangely, a watchman called out that he could see a white flag being hoisted. The radio man also reported the French had put out a message in the clear that they wished to seek terms. They had no intention

of dying bravely that day.

Louis Delfino was of a different stripe. There were men like him in every army, and in every navy and air force. There were men that were just a cut above the others, and then there were those you would have to stack three high to make half a man in combat. This was war, with heroes and slackers, artful warriors and clumsy fools, all thrown into the same arena.

It was no failure of the French Navy, for their ships of the line would acquit themselves very well in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. It was just the men on the scene that mattered now, not the ships. Some men had the will to fight, and knew how to go about it. Others did not. Lacking both will and skill at sea, the result of this engagement for Admiral Decoux was inevitable. He would return to Noumea, thankful to be under the protective umbrella of Japanese land based air power, all the planes from the carrier *Hiyo*. There he would stew, realizing that he would not even be master of that island, or even the port where his ships were docked. His war was a long, sullen slog from that day on, until the Americans would come calling one day... And they had long memories.

So ended the First Battle of the New Hebrides, and it was a mixed result for all concerned. The French had lost the *Bearn*, the destroyer *Fougueux*, and found both *Emil Bertin* and *Lamotte-Picquett* surrendered to the enemy and interned at Fiji. The Japanese had seen *Hiyo* limp off to Noumea, where it would remain for some time while crews tried to repair her damaged engine compartments. The Americans had lost the heavy cruiser *Houston*, but even worse, they had lost 9000 drums of Avgas on the *Admiral Halstead*. The Damage to *Antietam* would send that ship home to Pearl Harbor, and then to the west coast for a new "Triple Six" gun turret, and Hansen's air group would have to be rebuilt from planes arriving in Hawaii.

The *Pensacola* Convoy received the warm embrace of those three Aussie led cruisers, and the convoy sailed for Brisbane. For the time being, *Shiloh* sailed to Pearl with *Antietam*, where she would soon team up with the *Enterprise* and the newest kid on the carrier block, the USS *Saratoga*, arriving from San Francisco. Soon those three ships would sortie again, out looking for trouble, and just a little retribution under the command of yet another bulldog who was going to make an enormous difference in the long struggle ahead. Unlike Admiral Decoux, he had both will and skill in abundance, Admiral William 'Bull' Halsey.

* * *

So the lost convoy and Operation PLUM never got to the Philippines. Instead it made its way south and then west to Brisbane, and the main effort of the Japanese Army was raging on. They had landed at Lingayen Gulf north of Manila, and then drove relentlessly towards the city. In the south, troops arrived from their island outpost at Palau to land at Legaspi, where they raced up the lower reaches of the main island, meeting little resistance. It was virtually impossible for the defenders to try and meet them on the beaches. In the south alone, there were four broad bays and over 250 miles of beaches they could choose from to land, and defending them all with the forces available was out of the question.

Manila was a mill of rumors and fear. Some said the US Navy was coming with everything they had to the rescue. Others said it had all been destroyed at Pearl Harbor. Shop keepers boarded up their windows, sandbagged their doors, and families fled to the countryside to find lost uncles and aunts out of immediate harm's way. Like any large urban area, panic could spread very easily, making the streets a morass of animal drawn wood carts, bicycles and a few cars. People were packing up household belongings, living or dead, and it was common to see a father behind a hand cart, laden with everything he owned, including three squealing pigs and five chickens, and with his poor wife and a gaggle of children in tow.

A virtual flood of cable and signals traffic swamped every telegraph and postal office as people made frantic appeals to relatives overseas. It was war coming, sudden and uninvited, bringing confusion, an erosion of civil order, bank runs, panic buying, and all the unscrupulous corruption these activities were prone to. Yet this was merely the first swells of the storm. The tide of war would bring far more hardship and depravity in the days and months ahead.

The hardened Japanese troops faced ill equipped Philippine divisions, where some regiments had as little as five weeks training. One even took the field having had no training at all. They knew how to hold and carry their rifles, but not how to use them. Later, in the grueling stand MacArthur would make at Corregidor, many of these same men would fight and die with great valor, but now, they were like so much debris on the beach, swept inland by the rising tide of Japanese fortunes.

There was an almost comical moment when a call came in to UAAFFE

in Manila, informing them of the Japanese landings in the south. It had come from a railroad stationmaster, and is quoted here verbatim:

“There are four Jap boats in the harbor, sir, and the Japs are landing. What shall I do?”

The USAFFE Officer replied, "Just hang onto the phone and keep reporting.”

“There are about twenty Japs ashore already, sir, and more are coming.... Now there are about three hundred Japs outside the station, sir. What am I to do?”

“Just sit tight.”

“Sir, a few of those Japs, with an officer in front, are coming over here.”

“See what they want.” A moment passed...

“Those Japs want me to give them a train to take them to Manila, sir. What do I do now?”

“Tell them the next train leaves a week from Sunday. Don't give it to them.”

“Okay sir.”

Unfortunately, the Japanese were not about to wait until a week from next Sunday. They were establishing themselves ashore, seizing initial objectives, and pushing on. Soon they would land at Mindanao in the south and at Jolo, two outposts they would use to springboard their attack into Borneo. That was where the real plum was, the resource rich holdings of the Dutch and British oil companies.

There was oil at Sarawak near Kuching and at Miri near Brunei. There were also fields near Balikpapan, and the large island also afforded them numerous ports and airfields. These were the resources Japan had gone to war for, and they would become the heart of the new Pacific Empire they were striving to extend and build. Yet before that could be attained, the last two hard rocks of Allied resistance would have to be crushed. One would be MacArthur's stubborn defense, falling back through Manila to the rugged Bataan Peninsula, and the fortified Rock of Corregidor. The other would be the British defense of Singapore. If they could make a skillful withdrawal, Churchill believed they could hold that island outpost, for he had been forewarned by Fedorov of how the Japanese would bluff their way into a victory there that might have been forestalled.

These battles remained to be fought, and before they would conclude, the brutality of the war would show its ugly face. The troops Japan had

assembled for these operations had been combed from the best units in the Army, veteran soldiers with years of hard combat experience. Yet they were also some of the most heartless and brutal troops in the Empire, the men who raped Nanking, and the men who were responsible for the Death March on the Philippines, and many other atrocities.

No one was spared their spiteful ire. Prisoners received hideous treatment, captured civilian nurses were summarily raped and murdered, some thrown down onto the bodies of the dead patients they had once served for that act of depravity. Prisoners were beheaded, and some suffered an even more bizarre and lingering death, tied down and slowly carved up by their captors, who then literally barbecued their flesh and ate it while the helpless victim watched in utter agony.

A time would come when the US forces would advance with their own brand of cruelty, burning and blasting their way from one island outpost to another. At the end of Fedorov's history, the horrors of strategic firebombing and nuclear holocaust would await the proud conquerors that now strode so boldly into the South Pacific. But at this moment, no one could say how it would all play out. For the month of December would soon wear away, and the calendar would slowly turn to a new year, the pivotal months of 1942.

The war in the Pacific had only just begun.

Part VI

Wolf in the Fold

*“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea...”*

— **Lord Byron**

Chapter 16

Another man was going to figure prominently in these events as well, though he should have not have been alive in 1941, for he had not even been born yet. At that moment, he was standing aboard yet another ship that was never supposed to be in this world, his mind running along the fine points of an agenda as long and deep as that of Imperial Japan, and with a sense of his own self-importance to rival that of MacArthur himself—Vladimir Karpov.

There he stood, commander of the Free Siberian Navy, a single ship at sea now, with four or five destroyers huddled in the icy waters of Magadan back home. Unlike Admiral Decoux, however, he knew exactly how to command his ship, when to turn, when to fire, and his particular competence when it came to the violence of war was also layered with a flair for drama. Karpov had made his statement to Japan, one the ministers in Tokyo literally laughed off when they first received the messages. Japan had stepped boldly onto Siberian territory in 1908, and had kept it under foot ever since. Their Kwantung Army was between the Siberians and the object of their demands, Urajio, old Vladivostok, the war prize they had taken because of Karpov's last unfortunate sortie in the Sea of Japan.

Back then, he had faced an experienced and determined Admiral Togo, but the Japanese Navy that now graced the shores of Kure, Sasebo and Yokohama was an enormously enhanced force compared to Togo's fleet. As reports came in flurries concerning the outcome of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the progress of the Japanese offensive into Southeast Asia, Karpov's ultimatum was largely ignored. Fedorov's assessment had been spot on. There was simply no way they would ever consider handing over Vladivostok as Karpov wanted, nor would they give his demands even passing consideration.

On one level, Karpov knew that would be the case, but he also knew exactly how he would shake the lapels of the Japanese diplomats and get their attention. Japan's naval fortunes rested with her carriers. They were her real battle sword in the Pacific, clear and convincing proof that a sea change had swept through naval strategy, and the era of the great battleships was now over. The attack made by the *Kido Butai* had been largely symbolic of that fact. The loss of those fleet carriers at Midway was the great turning point in the war, one that would have eventually come some other place, with an

inevitability that was almost certain, but it came at Midway when four fleet carriers went to the bottom of the sea.

Now Karpov was considering how to proceed. Fedorov's course plot had been true, and on the 16th of December, *Kirov* found itself in a good position to launch helos and hone in on the location of the *Kido Butai*. It was not long before the *Oko* panels on the KA-40s found their quarry, about 300 miles north of Wake Island, half way home. The helos had approached to within 300 kilometers using their extended range panels to find the Japanese. While Admiral Nagumo had search planes up, he was not expecting a threat where he was, and even had minimal CAP up over the task force, giving his hard working pilots a good long rest on the journey home.

Karpov ordered the ship to continue to close, and it wasn't until late on the 17th of December that his prey was brought within missile range. In many ways, *Kirov* was like another battlecarrier as it crept up on the *Kido Butai*. Its missiles were like kamikaze planes to be sent out, sure to hit their targets, but never to return. Yet the longest range missile he had was the P-900, which could get to targets at a maximum range of 370 kilometers, or about 200 nautical miles. The ship had received better ranged weapons transferred from *Kazan* at one point in this long saga—but not this ship. Karpov was standing with the hand the ship was dealt when it first arrived, a royal flush in his mind, but it nonetheless had real limitations.

First off, there were only ten P-900s aboard. His real ship killers, of which he had a generous double order on hand, were the *Moskit-II* missiles, fast, heavy, but with a maximum strike range of only 222 kilometers, or about 120 nautical miles. Those Japanese carriers had strike planes aboard that could deliver ordnance at better than twice that range, and this meant that *Kirov* would have to come well within the strike radius of the *Kido Butai* if it wanted to engage. *Kirov*'s initial advantage was the sheer shock of a missile attack as it first struck home on his enemy, but both Karpov and Fedorov knew that it would not end there. The Japanese would fight, with a ferocity and tenacity that was unlike any other foe the ship had faced in its long sojourn through time.

That brought up the question of how to attack, as it was already clear that Karpov was taking the ship to war. He had declared all Japanese shipping found at sea would be deemed hostile, and treated accordingly.

"You know the drill," said Karpov. "It's the old struggle to obtain the first salvo, only in our case, that is now our easy prerogative. The question

now is how hard to hit them. A heavy salvo could rain hell upon them, just as they did with the American battleships at Pearl Harbor. But there are other ways to humble an enemy, the slow, measured cut.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” said Fedorov.

“Perhaps it is something I’ll have to demonstrate rather than explain,” said Karpov. “I suppose I could just get in close and give them the *Moskit-IIs*. A salvo of six or eight missiles would wreak havoc, would it not?”

“Given that none of those carriers are heavily armored, I would have to agree,” said Fedorov. “But what about a possible counterstrike? Remember what happened to the battle bridge the last time we faced the Japanese.”

“That isn’t going to repeat itself,” said Karpov. “First off, I will not be so squeamish in plucking out my enemy’s eyes if he comes looking for us. They aren’t using naval search radar, am I correct?”

“That was very limited technology at this point in the war,” said Fedorov. “No, they’ll rely on visual search from aircraft.”

“Exactly, which means I can see those search planes on the Fregat system long before they get anywhere near enough to spot us, and I can shoot them down with our long range S-300s. They’ll hit targets 150 nautical miles out.”

“We can do that 64 times,” said Fedorov.

“Yes, I’m well aware of the inventory, and our limitations. This is why I believe I’ll try something a little different here. I could smash them, obliterate them in fact, and that without even thinking about the special warheads we have. The shock of that would be quite daunting.”

“Yet they endured that at Midway, and still fought on for another three years,” Fedorov warned.

“Precisely.” Karpov clasped his hands behind his back, thinking. “How to break them psychologically, that is the question.”

“That won’t be easy, sir.”

“Nothing about war is ever easy, but I can show them what I’m capable of, and how powerless their vaunted *Kido Butai* really is, and I think that will be the first lesson here. I addressed the crew this morning, and they are ready. The ship is ready, and so am I.”

Fedorov noted that Karpov did not ask him to second the decision he was making now. He listened to his *Starpom*, considered everything Fedorov said, but when it came time to take action, the orders came from Karpov.

“Mister Samsonov.”

“Sir?”

“Please sound battle stations and make two P-900 cruise missiles ready for immediate action. I will want to see your target plot board before we fire.”

The warning claxon sounded, and everyone on the bridge stiffened, sitting just a little taller in their chairs, eyes fixed on their equipment.

“Air threat report,” said Karpov, as if running down a checklist in his mind.

“The screen is clear out to 150 kilometers on the Fregat system,” said Rodenko.

“Good.” Karpov drifted over to the CIC, his eyes on Samsonov, seeing the big man hunched over his board. His fire control officer had been eager to conduct live fire exercises, though the ship never got that chance before this impossible accident sent them here. He had heard all the rumors at first, then the endless discussions among the junior officers, but Victor Samsonov was a simple man. His world was the ship, which seemed largely unchanged aside from the absence of the Admiral. His universe of understanding was in that CIC, and the weapons and systems at his command there. All he felt now was the jubilation of a warrior about to exercise his deadly craft.

“Missiles up and target board ready sir!”

Karpov was hovering over his broad right shoulder now. “filter your data and show me primes.”

With a flick of a switch, Samsonov told his computers to display the strongest signal returns in the clustered group of some twenty contacts. The structure of the enemy cruising formation was clearly evident when the system processed the data, and then drew out the equivalent of a map on another screen. By analyzing that data over time, noting air blips rising from signal points, it was possible to determine which contact was a carrier. One strong signal was well out in front, surrounded by a cluster of smaller contacts. Karpov took it to be one of the fast battleships that had accompanied the force, and immediately discarded it as a first strike target.

“This is interesting,” he said, looking Fedorov’s way. “I thought there were six Japanese carriers in this operation.”

“Remember that Nikolin picked up orders for the *Kaga* to detach to Kwajalein,” said Fedorov.

“Yes, but that should leave five here. I see only three primary contacts, if I’m correct in assuming this one here is a battleship.”

Fedorov came over, noting the target board with a knowing glance.

“Wake Island,” he said quietly. “It’s amazing how the history rings so true in places, in spite of all the changes. In our history, the Japanese detached Carrier Division 2 to support the attack on the American outpost at Wake, along with the heavy cruisers *Tone* and *Chikuma*. If this remains true, then those three contacts would be the *Akagi*, the fleet flagship, and then the two newest carriers, *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* in Carrier Division 5 following.”

“Excellent,” said Karpov. “Here,” he pointed to the carrier leading this group of three. I want a P-900 right there. Mister Samsonov.”

“You’re going to hit the *Akagi*?”

Karpov looked at him. “You would prefer another target, Mister Fedorov?”

“It’s not a question of ships in my mind now sir. It’s the men aboard them. That is Admiral Nagumo’s flagship, and he is a very significant player in the opening game of this war. After replenishing in our history, he attacked the Australian Port Darwin, mounted a daring Indian Ocean raid, and then moved on to meet his doom at Midway. Suppose he were wounded or killed? That could have a significant effect.”

“Of course it would, but I am not ready to try and sort out all the possible consequences each time I fire. You are still looking over your shoulder, Fedorov. We are not sifting through the old history now, except as a possible intelligence source. Here we write all new history. Nagumo went to war taking the same risk any man does when he picks up a weapon. So fate will just have to throw the dice in his regard. That is not my concern. Mister Samsonov?”

“Keying target sir.... Missiles 09 and 08 ready to fire.” Karpov noted that Samsonov carefully started with missile nine, as number ten was in a special silo used for the mounting of an equally special warhead. He had not given that order, and all those weapons were stowed in Martinov’s larders below in the armory, but that missile would be the last to fire in the event it was ever tapped for special duty.

“I like that,” said Karpov. “Yes, always affix a numerical suffix to each missile we fire. It will help me track our inventory. Very well, Mister Samsonov, sound your missile fire warning, and commence.”

* * *

Admiral Nagumo did not yet know it, but a large and powerful wolf

was stalking his fold. He was standing on the bridge of *Akagi*, just having finished a discussion with Captain Kiichi Hasegawa concerning the Wake Island detachment. The two carriers they had sent south to bolster the attack on the American held Wake Island were well on their way, and should be reporting in soon. The history had indeed reflected back with great integrity here, with one small change. This time Nagumo had sent Carrier Division 5 south, largely because it had been at the back of his cruising order, and was easier to move. That meant he had Carrier Division 2 in tow now, with *Hiryu* and *Soryu*.

From all reports the enemy garrison on Wake was putting up a stubborn fight. The initial landings had been repulsed, with the loss of a destroyer, and a little more air power was needed to soften the island defenses up, along with a promise that the Japanese would be back soon to knock a little harder on Wake's door.

It was a little after 15:00 when the radio man came in with a report from a search plane of a strange contrail in the sky, aimed directly at the task force.

"What is this supposed to mean?" he handed the report to the Captain. "A fast moving vapor trail?"

The Captain frowned at the paper, but at that moment a bell rang and the upper watch was reporting verbally that something was in the sky to the north. Nagumo considered the possibilities quickly. The only land mass that could have launched an aircraft was Wake Island to the south. What would be coming out of the north? Could one of the American carriers have been so bold as to follow them? Surely his search planes would have spotted such a task force creeping up, but he had not paid much attention to the northern flank. He had three fighters up on cap, with three more on the decks of his three carriers ready for immediate launch. He had it in mind to have his Air Commander, Masudo Shogo, vector in one of those fighters for a look, until he saw what the watchmen were reporting with his own eyes.

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

Then, to his utter amazement, the falling aircraft leveled off just before it would have crashed into the sea. All the men on the bridge who saw it

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

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

Chapter 17

The thing in the sky flashed in at them now, coming even faster, though he could hear no sound at all. It was well ahead of the roar of its own engine noise in this final approach, at almost Mach 2, though its high altitude flight path had been sub-sonic at Mach 0.8. The missile had completed its mind boggling evasive maneuver run, intended to defeat weapons that were not even aimed at it, weapons that simply did not exist, except on the ship it had been fired from. No radars were looking for it, no SAMs taking aim, and no fast firing Gatling guns waited on the final line of defense. *Akagi*, the fleet flagship, and one of Japan's most venerable carriers, was now no more than a fish in the barrel, about to be harpooned.

The P-900 carried a powerful 400 kilogram warhead, and only the *Moskit-II* was heavier. It was an optimized heavy HE blast-fragmentation penetrator, and it was going to strike *Akagi* right amidships. Even though the ship had not fully completed its 1935 refit to extend the upper flight deck all the way to the bow, *Akagi* did have her island installed in that work, and a slightly longer top deck than the original design. That island was on the port side of the ship, opposite the odd downward facing exhaust stack on the starboard side so that the smoke would not interfere with bridge operations.

The P-900 would strike directly on that strangely curved stack, obliterating it, and penetrating deep into the ship's lower decks. There were hangers crowded with aircraft on both sides of that compartment, but the bulkheads would not contain the blast. The explosion was even enough to rupture the flight deck above, rendering the carrier all but inoperable when it came to flight operations. A Zero sitting in that spot on the flight deck was broken and flung up and off the carrier. The heavy black smoke billowed from the gaping hole, and the bridge crew stared, aghast.

Nagumo saw the deck and plane heave upward, felt the jarring impact, still stunned and not yet even knowing what could have possibly hit the ship. Yet he had seen it with his own eyes, and now the roar of chaos and fire was all about him. It was as if some demonic spirit had simply reached down and hammered his fist against the side of the carrier, breaking its hard metal hull and shattering all within.

The ship had six inch belt armor, a legacy of her origins as a battlecruiser, but it had been slimmed down from ten inches and lowered

during her conversion to a carrier. So the missile had hit just above that hard shield, right on the vulnerable external side mounted stack. The ship had already taken some damage there in the American air raid near Pearl Harbor, but this was complete destruction. The side ventilation stack was completely gone.

The shock of that hit weighed heavily on the entire bridge crew, but they would soon learn that the entire center of the upper hanger deck was involved with fire. Had the range been shorter, those fires would have been much more severe. As it was, the missile had expended almost all its fuel before striking, and so it was the warhead, and sheer kinetic force, that did most of the damage, the explosion igniting any fuel in the planes stored in that portion of the hanger.

There were six more planes on the aft flight deck, three aloft, five that were downed in the raid on Pearl Harbor, but all the rest, some 58 aircraft, were below in the hangers. About half were fueled, but there was no ordnance installed, and that had also been a saving grace. The ship had therefore taken a severe blow, but not a fatal one. Had her decks and hangers been crowded with fully fueled and armed aircraft, she would have faced uncontrollable fires from that single hit, and shared the fate of the last carrier struck down by the mighty *Kirov*, the German *Graf Zeppelin*.

Nagumo was shaken by the sudden and unexpected attack. With *Kaga* already damaged in the carrier duel off Hawaii, the thunder that had struck *Akagi* had now effectively removed the entire 1st Carrier Division from the navy's order of battle for months. Reacting in the heat and shock of the moment, it was soon clear that this attack had been made by a single aircraft, deliberately crashed into his carrier to achieve maximum damage. But what could it have been? How could it move as it did, with such speed? There was no plane he had ever seen that could do what he had just witnessed. It was as if *Raijin*, the god of thunder, had just hurled his lightning down from above.

As the next minutes passed, and damage control parties reported, it was clear that the ship was badly hurt. Now he met with Captain Kiichi Hasegawa, Air Officer Masuda Shogo, Strike Leader Mitsuo Fuchida and one of the chief planners of the operation just concluded, Minoru Genda. No man among them could explain what just happened.

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

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

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

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

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

“*Hiryu* and *Soryu* are already scrambling fighters,” said Admiral Nagumo, glancing at Genda as he spoke. “We can clearly see the direction it came from. It has left that high white vapor trail in its wake.”

“That plane could have maneuvered to that heading prior to attacking us, simply to hide the real location of the ship.”

“Perhaps,” said Nagumo, but I will order a search to the north in any case. The only question I have is this. We sunk one American carrier off Hawaii. How could there be another here, this far west, without our knowing it.?”

“Nothing followed us,” said Fuchida. “I have had searches mounted to the east for the last three days.”

“But not to the north,” said Nagumo. “This enemy carrier may have been lurking there, which means the Americans may have known about this operation from the very first.”

“You are suggesting this was a deliberate ambush?” Shogo had a difficult time believing that. “All our intelligence found nothing to suggest that could be possible.”

“Nor did we know where the American carriers were,” said Nagumo. “Do you not find it strange that none were at Pearl Harbor—that they all left that place just prior to our attack?”

“Then *Hiryu* and *Soryu* will have to deal with this threat,” said Fuchida. “The 5th Carrier Division is now approaching Wake Island to support our landing operation there.”

Nagumo shook his head. “A third of our carriers off to the south. *Kaga* has limped to Kwajalein, and now we will be lucky to put that fire out and return *Akagi* safely to Japan.”

“Sir,” said Captain Hasegawa. “The loss of our ventilation shaft and the

damage to the boilers from that attack has reduced our speed to a maximum 18 knots. You should consider transferring your flag to one of the other carriers.”

Nagumo looked at him, realizing the deep shame he must feel, and the difficulty in making such a suggestion, his ship to be gelded and sent home alone. He then looked at the others, one by one, seeing a silent accord in their eyes that Fuchida eventually vocalized.

“*Hiryu* and *Soryu* are fast, and now we must fly like the wind to find and attack this unexpected enemy. *Kirishima* is still with us. May I suggest that ship position itself right off our starboard side. It has good armor, and better guns to repel another attack like this. It can serve as a strong shield for *Akagi* while the other carriers strike out to the north to find and kill our enemy.”

“Should we recall the 5th Carrier Division?” asked Shogo.

“Two carriers should be sufficient here,” said Genda. “Leave *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* where they are.”

“I agree,” said Nagumo. “Signal Rear Admiral Tamon of the 2nd Carrier Division. I will transfer my flag to *Soryu* at once. The destroyer *Akigumo* will come alongside *Akagi* to assist. Captain Hasegawa, you have fought well, and there is no shame to be laid upon your shoulders as I leave you now. Your orders are to break off here, move south to effect an eventual linkup with Carrier Division 5. You must do everything in your power to get *Akagi* safely back to Japan.”

“Sir,” said Fuchida. “That hit was right between the forward and ‘midships elevators. We have lost many planes on the hanger deck, and the crews have fought like demons to move as many aircraft as possible forward and aft, away from the fires. As for the pilots, they are a precious asset. It may be wise to send them along with you to the *Soryu*. We can always replace those planes, but the men who can fly them are a rare jewel.”

Nagumo looked first at Hasegawa, seeing him nod agreement with a bow. “Very well,” he said. “Leave Captain Hasegawa enough to get a fighter squadron into the air for self defense. If the damage can be controlled and the deck patched, he can use them to mount combat air patrols on the way home. I will transfer my flag at 11:00. Pilots selected by Fuchida and all members of the Fleet Air Planning Staff will accompany me to *Soryu*. Yet, as this ship is in no immediate danger of sinking, the Emperor’s portrait will remain here in the capable hands of Captain Hasegawa.”

The next hour, all was quiet. The fleet was at the highest state of

readiness, and the four ships of the 18th Destroyer Division were attached to the last mobile element of the once vaunted *Kido Butai*. Only two destroyers remained to escort *Akagi* and *Kirishima* south. The two carriers that now made up Nagumo's hunting party had fared very well at Pearl Harbor. *Hiryu* had only lost three planes, and five were lost from *Soryu*. So their air wings were all at full strength, given the fact that many of *Kaga*'s planes had landed on the other carriers before she was detached. Each of the two carriers had 62 planes, with eight or nine spares from *Kaga* and some even remaining in crates.

Aboard *Kirov*, Karpov had not followed up his first missile strike with a second P-900. Instead he waited, wanting to see the reaction in the enemy formation, and launching a diplomatic missile at Tokyo instead. He signaled that he had just initiated hostilities against the *Kido Butai*, giving the formation's exact position, and stating that he had deliberately struck the carrier *Akagi*, Fleet Flagship, as a final warning. He knew that the Japanese had a small destroyer flotilla anchored at Urajio, Vladivostok. So he demanded that flotilla make steam by 24:00 that night, and leave the port as a sign that the Japanese Government would initiate talks on the repatriation of Siberian territories. The message also indicated that any ground troops present in the Harbor were to be embarked and returned to Japan.

This was, of course, an impossible demand from the Japanese perspective. Urajio was now their principal supply port for the Kwantung Army. The rail line from there to Harbin in Manchuria, to occupied Chita, was now the quickest overland route to move those supplies up to the Baikal front. To lose Urajio would force them to completely restructure their logistics plan, moving the bulk of supplies to Dalian, the old Port Arthur they had also won in wars of the early part of the century.

"They won't concede such a strategic port simply because you have struck a single carrier," said Fedorov.

"Of course not," said Karpov. "But I now give them every warning that further attacks will follow should they fail to comply with my demands."

"What is the point in that?" said Fedorov.

Karpov responded with a single word. "Drama."

"This isn't theater, Admiral."

"Oh, but it is, Fedorov. I'm going to literally telegraph my punches here. I intend to show them just how powerless they are against us, and then the real demands will be made. I've just nicked their cheek with the tip of my

sword, but that was only the first cut. I intend to bleed them, hobble them, humiliate them.”

Rodenko looked over, a warning in his eyes. “The two remaining carriers have now moved away and they are turning north. They appear to be splitting their battlegroup. The original target has reduced speed, and it is now moving off to the south.”

“Mister Fedorov? Your assessment?”

“No mystery here,” said Fedorov. “If he wasn’t killed in that missile strike, I believe Nagumo has just transferred his flag and sent *Akagi* south with orders to try and limp home. The remaining carriers should be moving at close to 30 knots soon.”

“Correct,” said Rodenko.

“And they are looking for us,” Fedorov continued. “They should turn into the wind in a few minutes, so I expect them to assume a heading of about 350. Then they’ll launch a search detail covering this entire northern arc out to at least 300 nautical miles. If my navigation plot is correct, we are now 210 nautical miles north of their position, which is just an hour’s flying time at the normal cruising speed of a D3A Val. They’ll be about twenty minutes launching and then form up before dispersing on their assigned search path. So I expect they will have planes in visual range of us in about ninety minutes. Their D5A Vals could range out to nearly 800 nautical miles, and the Kate torpedo bombers close to 1100. Those planes are likely to be used in the search, and they will be armed.”

“Fair game then,” said Karpov. “It won’t be like Volsky’s equivocation over taking down an unarmed search plane. Then again, with me it would never be like that. How many planes do those ships carry, Fedorov?”

“Over 60 aircraft each. That’s a good chunk of our SAM inventory.”

“Indeed,” said Karpov. “Mister Samsonov, let us show them the futility of what they are now attempting to do. Mister Rodenko will closely track all those search planes, and we will take out any who come anywhere close to a sighting position on this vessel. Ready one silo of our S-300 SAMs.”

“Aye sir. Activating missiles 63 thru 61. Missile 64 has already been fired.”

Karpov moved to the radar screen, watching over Rodenko’s shoulder for some time. Fedorov’s prediction was right on. They could soon clearly see the planes dispersing into a wide search pattern that would cover everything through a 180 degree arc north of the carriers.

“Those three planes there,” said Karpov. “Feed targeting data to Samsonov.”

Rodenko tapped the three contacts on his screen, then pressed a button to feed the data to the CIC. In a matter of seconds, they were on Samsonov’s board as red targets, and he quickly assigned the three S-300s he had readied.

“You realize shooting those planes down will clearly reveal our position,” said Fedorov. “They’ll know exactly where our jab hit them, and the missing teeth will tell them where we are—that and the contrails of those S-300s.”

“Yet you just said those planes would be armed,” said Karpov. “So they will be treated as the threats they are, and destroyed. Mister Samsonov. Fire on designated targets.”

“Aye sir.”

Chapter 18

The warning claxon, the snap of the hatch opening, the hiss of the first missile out of the underdeck silo—it was all par for the course they had been on these many long months. And sure as the moon would rise later that night, those three planes were going to die. Karpov watched the blistering speed of his missile tracks to the targets, one by one. When it was over he lingered, noting the reaction time of his enemy. It was as if they were fighting a modern carrier battlegroup that was moving in slow motion. The lightning fast reflexes of the Russian ship were now further amplified by the plodding, groping slowness of the enemy.

“Give them another twenty minutes, and you will see their strike wave forming up,” said Fedorov.

As before, he was correct.

Rodenko notified Karpov that the first of the enemy planes were now starting to emerge from the contact blips of the carriers. This now presented one more decision.

“Am I correct in assuming the decks of those ships will be full of strike planes, with more in the hangers below, all armed and fueled?”

“That is very likely.” Fedorov knew exactly where this was going.

“Then those carriers are now at their moment of maximum vulnerability. A pair of SSMs will do the work that a hundred SAMs might have to do in another ten or fifteen minutes. This is not a matter for further deliberation. I’ve been watching to see how they operate, and now the theater is over. Mister Nikolin. Send coded message three. Mister Samsonov. Range to primary targets?”

“Sir, 190 nautical miles. Just within range.”

“Two more P-900s please, as before. Assign one to each carrier. You may fire immediately.”

“Aye sir. Firing Missiles 8 and 7.”

Raijin the God of Lightning and Thunder would soon be beating his war drums, and right at his side would go *Raiju*, his demon friend, called “thunderbeast” by the Japanese, and depicted as a white and blue wolf surrounded by lightning. It was said that buildings and trees would be clawed by this demon in a storm, and now those claws were out to score the hard metal hulls of two dragons at sea. *Hiryu*, the Flying Dragon, would be the

first to feel their bite.

The approaching missiles, with the long vapor trails, would again confound the Japanese, to the utter amazement of the officers and crew who saw them dancing above the sea in that final dizzying run to their targets. Zero fighters had tried to climb up after them before they dove for the sea, but when they did so, accelerating through Mach 1.5, the pilots were astounded to see them streak away. They were unearthly in their movement, a computer controlled dance no more than 20 meters above the ocean.

Every ship in the division opened up on them, but it was simply impossible for the gunners to track and aim at a target moving at that speed. One of the escorting destroyers had maneuvered just off the stern of *Soryu*, and when Commander Ogata saw the missile aiming for that ship, he ordered all ahead full, in a desperate effort to interpose his vessel and take the enemy lance upon himself.

Nagumo watched from the bridge of *Soryu*, the Blue Dragon, dumfounded to think these two planes could move and strike his ships again, but they did. He saw the first missile bolt into *Hiryu*, and the massive orange fireball that soon became a series of powerful explosions, one after another, as the planes in the stricken hanger deck began to blow up.

Yet his own ship was spared the same fate by the sacrifice of destroyer *Arare*, which had not hesitated a second to answer the question posed by Rooks' Gambit. It raced in just as the missile was about to hit, taking the blow about 50 feet from her bow. Her Commander had instinctively employed the only tactic that could stand as a defense against such attacks. Tovey had used it with his own cruisers and destroyers, then the German fleet when *Siegfried* and *Loki* had been sacrificed in the same way. Now *Arare* would endure the agonizing death, for 400 kilograms of high explosives, thundering in at nearly Mach 2 on a missile weighing over two tons, was enough to literally break the destroyer in two.

Half of the carriers that had left Japan to make their daring attack at Pearl Harbor were now casualties of war, two stricken by an enemy they had not even seen. The damage to the Flying Dragon was much more serious than that inflicted on *Akagi*. The P-900 was a perfect carrier killer, easily penetrating the thin side armor of those ships, and exploding right in the interior spaces of the hanger deck. There it would detonate armed and fueled planes, and start raging fires that the Japanese damage control teams were often unable to suppress. In the case of *Hiryu*, the ship was so badly ravaged

by all the secondary explosions that it would not survive. The fires would spread unchecked, eventually reaching her boiler spaces, until the loss of engineering capacity there saw the ship fall off to only 12 knots.

Nagumo was staggered by the loss, his eyes fearfully scanning the northern horizon for any sign of this amazing enemy weapon. This time, many who had seen the attack claimed it was clearly some kind of aerial torpedo, a rocket that made all the rumors and half formed intelligence concerning events in the Atlantic real. With great regret, he coded a message to Tokyo to inform them of the damage to all three carriers. At the same time, he ordered the 5th Carrier Division to abandon *Akagi*, and steam at their best practical speed for home waters, determined to salvage Japan's two newest carriers unscathed.

No further attack came in that long hour after *Hiryu* was hit. The three destroyers remaining in the task force huddled around the stricken carrier, while Nagumo was now forced to make a most difficult decision.

"We must continue our launch at once," Air Commander Shogo argued. "You have seen what has happened to *Hiryu*. If we are also hit with all these planes armed and fueled, then that will be our fate as well. It was only the bravery of Commander Ogata on *Arare* that now gives us this moment to attack. We must find the ship launching these weapons and destroy it."

"Yet to do so we will have to abandon *Hiryu*," said Nagumo, "With the destroyers taking on her surviving crew, we will be completely exposed if we launch now. And supposing we do get all our planes off? The danger still exists. If we are struck, and unable to recover planes, then we lose them all, every plane, every pilot. We become nothing more than an empty shell." He looked to Fuchida now, knowing he would appreciate the value of those planes and pilots.

"*Kaga* has already suffered that fate, and now *Akagi* and *Hiryu*. We managed to save 48 pilots, but some of those were on *Hiryu*, and who knows how many remain alive. I have 126 trained pilots aboard this ship. If we lose *Soryu*, as Admiral Nagumo fears, then we lose them all. Two thirds of the *Kido Butai* will have been effectively destroyed. Even if *Akagi* and *Kaga* return to safe waters, they, too, will be empty shells. And yet... How can we not at least strike at our enemy? If we do nothing, we may lose all. Better that these men die in battle. That was what they trained for, and it would at least be an honorable death."

"Agreed," said Shogo. "We must order the strike to proceed. *Hiryu*

already had twelve planes up before it was hit. We must continue the launch immediately. We are losing daylight in another hour!”

Nagumo hesitated, thinking, until he realized there was really no option. What else could he do? To turn away now was not only a supreme loss of face, but it would also offer no guarantee that *Soryu* could escape harm. Fuchida, more than any other man here, knew the value of the men that would fly this strike, but they simply had to go. There was no other choice.

“*Soryu* will turn into the wind again and proceed to launch with all possible speed. All destroyers will move to a position off our starboard side and provide close escort. They will take a lesson from the bravery of Commander Ogata.”

The fire in Shogo’s eyes was far better than the shame he might see there had the Admiral decided otherwise. Now Fuchida saluted stiffly, and smiled. He was soon off at a run, heading for the flight deck to join and lead the strike.

Aboard *Kirov*, Rodenko reported the close clustering of four contacts, all moving at 30 knots, and the slow appearance of additional airborne contacts. They could visually see the launch proceeding on the super enhanced radar screens.

“They persist,” said Karpov with a shake of his head.

“It is clear that one of the destroyers was hit by our second P-900,” said Fedorov. “Now look at them, they are quick studies. Those three remaining escorts are in close to form a missile shield for the carrier.”

“You know how we corrected that problem earlier,” said Karpov. “We need to re-program some of our missiles for plunging descent instead of a low level attack over the water. At the moment, they approach like torpedo bombers, and we must convert them to dive bombers. That will frustrate this defense based on the sacrifice of screening ships. I could simply fire a barrage salvo, but the range is still almost 200 nautical miles, and the only missile we have that can go that distance is the P-900. Fedorov?”

“Well sir, We have only seven more P-900s, and one of them is in silo number 10, so let us presume we might wish to withhold that missile. That limits your salvo now to six, and effectively expends all our longer range missile strike capability. If we turn right at them, and make our best speed, it would be another hour before we get inside 120 nautical miles for the *Moskit-IIs* to fire. In that interval, we can expect that strike wave forming up will find us and attack.”

“How many planes?”

“Depending on what ship that is, somewhere between 60 and 80 aircraft.”

Now it was Karpov’s turn to ponder the difficult decision. Should he expend the precious P-900s, or close the range to bring his best ship killers into the battle? While he had every confidence that the ship could meet and defeat the enemy strike wave, that would come at a cost. He remembered how he fought those earlier battles against the Japanese. The ship had only 72 SAMs when the first really big strike wave came in at them, 67 planes strong. They got all but seven, but one plane got through, and came right down on the ship in a deadly kamikaze dive. It struck the battle bridge, and that was the only thing that saved them, the 200mm roof and deck of that armored box was enough to take the hit, but had that plane struck them anywhere else...

Something always gets through in an attack of this size, thought Karpov, but we have to be letter perfect. We’ve got to stop them all. I have more than twice as many SAMs as we had when I first defended the ship against a major air strike like this. Between the S-300s and Klinoks I have 188 missiles that can fire at ranges from 45 to 150 nautical miles. Suppose it takes 60 to 80 here, as Fedorov suggests. That is more firepower than I wanted to expend...

He looked at his watch, seeing it was 17:40. The sun was already low, and then an idea came to him. “Mister Fedorov,” he said. “When will that sun set?”

“In about forty minutes sir, at 18:18.”

“Excellent. Ready the KA-226. I want it armed with air to air missiles.”

“Sir? You want to engage the strike wave with a single helicopter?”

Karpov just looked at him, a look that spoke volumes without vocalizing any admonishment there in front of the men. Fedorov read it well enough, and decided to keep to his bargain and follow protocols. “Mister Nikolin,” he said. “Order the Helo Bay to make ready on the KA-226 for immediate launch—full air defense loadout with the best missiles we have.”

Karpov said nothing, but was pleased Fedorov had withheld any further objection before seconding his order. He knew he owed the man an explanation, and drifted over, his eyes on Rodenko’s radar screen. “The ship will come about and assume a heading of 350 degrees,” he said. “All ahead full!”

The helm responded smartly, and *Kirov* surged ahead to her full battle speed of 32 knots. Now Karpov looked at Fedorov. “The KA-226 will launch

and maneuver here,” he said pointing to the Navigation Plexiglas board that denoted the position of all these contacts. “I want it well east of our new heading. Those enemy planes are losing daylight. It will take them at least forty minutes to get out here, and as they come, I want the KA-226 to engage them with a few missiles.”

“Saving our SAMs?” asked Fedorov. “It will only be a pin prick, sir. The strike will not be impeded.”

“Perhaps, but it may be diverted. Those planes will not be using radar, correct? They will rely on visual sightings. So I want the helo to lay a nice prominent trail back to its position with those missile fires. The vapor trails should glow nicely as the sun goes down. In the meantime, the ship will rig for black, and we will run northwest. If they take the bait, there will be no further action tonight. I want to see what the Japanese government does with my midnight ultimatum before I proceed here.”

Fedorov raised his eyebrows, nodding his head. “A clever ploy,” he said. “It just might work.”

And it did work. Nagumo’s strike wave was formed up and on its way north at that very moment. With *Kirov* still 200 nautical miles out, that was about an hour’s flying time at normal cruising speeds. That meant the planes would not really get into visual sighting range until 18:40, in that long gloaming hour after sunset. In that fading ocher light, they would see a pair of R-75 air-to-air missiles coming right at them at about two o’clock. Originally developed for high performance fighters as the R-73, this missile was adapted for use on helicopters to give them some long range air defense. The KA-226 could carry them, and they would range out 50 kilometers and move at Mach 2.5.

Two planes would die that evening, one an escorting Zero and the second a D3A Val dive bomber. The contrails clearly marked the direction of the attack, which prompted the entire strike wave to turn and follow it, thinking to find the ship that fired the weapons. The military version of the KA-226 was just fast enough to disappear into the light cloud cover, all running lights off. When the planes reached their expected target area, they found nothing but empty sea, for *Kirov* had also raced away to the northeast and was now well over their horizon, which was considerably shortened with the setting sun.

The frustrated strike wave was ordered home, as it would be difficult enough to conduct a night landing on *Soryu*. They had hoped to find their

enemy, and get retribution for the loss of *Hiryu*, which was now so badly burned that Nagumo ordered one of his three destroyers back to put four torpedoes into her side.

Flying Dragon slipped beneath the waves at 21:30 that night, never to rise again. Virtually alone on the wide Pacific now, the Admiral ordered his Blue Dragon to turn away south, and run at 34 knots after the recovery. No man on that bridge said a word, though rumors were now already circulating. Some said that all this misfortune was the work of the *Ayakashi*, spirits and ghosts that were seen to appear above the water. It was said they were the souls of those who died at sea, intent on dragging the living in passing ships to their watery death to join them. Some said the *Ayakashi* would take the form of a sea serpent, others that they were only spirits that haunted that thin boundary between water and air.

No matter what they were called, they carried with them the yawning danger of the unknown. The fleet had been hunted by the boat ghosts, by the oily serpent *Ikuchi*, which could only be appeased by receiving a tribute of coins. Some crewmen actually tossed coins overboard that night, whispering a silent prayer that the beast leave them in peace. But down on the lower deck of *Soryu*, as the maintenance crews worked to service the last of the recovered aircraft, one man spoke another name—*Mizuchi*—a legendary sea dragon. The pilot heard it, feeling very strange after that, and sleeping fitfully all that night.

He was not a believer when it came to ghosts and demons, but for some reason, this beast continued to plague him. He looked around him in the dark, wishing he was back aboard his own ship, *Zuikaku*, the Auspicious Crane. He had been out after the American carriers at Pearl Harbor, one of the men in on the battle that sunk the *Lexington*. But when his plane straggled home, the only carrier he could find was *Soryu*. His Val was damaged enough to keep him there for many days, and by the time it was finally repaired, his 5th Carrier Division had been detached for the Wake Island operation.

So there he was, marooned on the Blue Dragon, and spending a sleepless night fearing yet another dragon that was said to haunt the oceans and even rivers where the wary feared to go—*Mizuchi*. He could not shake the harrowing feeling that he knew what was out there on the edge of the night, silently stalking them in the darkness. Yet he chided himself, trying to chase his fear with the cold logic of reason.

All that night, he had strange dreams, of a dark ship, with tall

battlements, bristling with dragon horns, its long white wake the tail of a sea beast, its claws a sharp death that could streak through the air like fiery demons. Lieutenant Commander Hayashi did not know why he was so troubled that night, but he could not shake the feeling that he had seen this hidden enemy once before, in a dream, in a nightmare, in another life....

He had seen it, yes, in another life, for he was the same man who had sacrificed his life for honor and vengeance, making his plane a human guided missile, and striking *Kirov* to destroy the aft battle bridge. And now Fate rustled the willow fronds of his recollection like a darksome wind, and whispered in a dry voice to him, speaking a single word.

Remember...

Part VII

Aftermath

“All was deadly still. There was no call and no echo of a song. Sorrow seemed to be in the air. 'Victory after all I suppose!' said Bilbo, feeling his aching head. 'Well it seems a very gloomy business.' ”

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Chapter 19

That night Nagumo changed his heading, taking the Blue Dragon due south at 32 Knots for some time before signaling Carrier Division 5 off Wake Island to rendezvous. Some inner sense warned him of grave danger, the presence of that unseen wolf that had been stalking his fold. *Akagi* followed as best she could, her speed off to no more than 18 knots, and with orders now to proceed to the big Japanese naval base at Truk, some 1100 miles to the south. The Home Islands were still 2000 miles away, and so Nagumo looked for the best friendly anchorage he could find for that precious ship.

As for *Kirov*, Karpov lingered north, deciding to wait for the stroke of midnight for news from his intelligence unit at Vladivostok. The Japanese destroyer flotilla, and all the garrison troops there, had not made a move. By this time, after recalling his helicopters to refuel, the Japanese had slipped away. *Akagi* was already 300 nautical miles to the south, and the faster carriers were linking up and turning for home, now over 420 miles away.

"We won't catch them now," said Fedorov. "Those carriers are very fast. You might get south and find *Akagi*."

Karpov considered that, then decided to wait. He had received the news from Tyrenkov via a secret code message sent to Nikolin. The words there struck him: Plan 7. It was a special protocol he had set in place in the event of another attack by Volkov on Ilanskiy. Now it appeared that exactly that was underway, which set his mind to wondering what Volkov could possibly be up to. He was suddenly anxious, pacing on the bridge as he waited for more news, but no word came.

"Something amiss?" Fedorov was at his side, and Karpov gave him a strange look, then simply waved him to the plot room, shutting the door when they had entered.

"Trouble at home," he said at last. "A place you will be well familiar with—Ilanskiy."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The kind I think you instigated once, Fedorov. Don't think I wasn't aware of your little Special Operation. No doubt you set Troyak loose with his Marines, and it was quite obvious what your intention was."

"I won't argue the matter," said Fedorov. "Yes, it was my intention to prevent you, or anyone else, from ever using that back stairway again. I wish

I had never stopped there that night, because I'm responsible for this entire mess—everything—Sergei Kirov, Orenburg, all of it."

Even as he said that he recalled the long conversation he had with Director Kamenski and Admiral Volsky. The Director would not see the blame laid at Fedorov's feet, and he said as much:

"Remember," Kamenski had told him. "It was Orlov who wrote that journal note that you discovered. Without that you would have never launched your mission to rescue him."

"I suppose Orlov would have had good reason to jump ship," Admiral Volsky had put in. For that was the reason Fedorov had hatched his plan in the first place—to find Orlov. Yet Kamenski pushed the matter ever further back, to Karpov himself, the man before him here again.

"He might have," said Kamenski. *"But not unless this Karpov here had hatched his little plot to take the ship. So you see, Fedorov, you want all the blame to begin with you, but nothing you did would have ever occurred if not for Karpov's little rebellion, or Orlov's strange letter. He is more than a little fish, I think. Karpov is a free radical, a wildcard, an unaccountable force in all of this history we've been writing and re-writing. Everything that has happened, except perhaps that first explosion on the Orel, can be laid at Karpov's feet, so do not be greedy in taking all this on yourself, Fedorov. You were just reacting to events he had already set in motion."*

"But if I had not spoken to Mironov—to Sergei Kirov—then Stalin might have lived and the nation would not be fragmented."

"Don't think you killed Joseph Stalin now," Kamenski had chided. *"Sergei Kirov has already confessed to that crime, or so I was told. So you see, Fedorov, Kirov is not a puppet. Your whisper in his ear decided nothing. He used his own free will to do what he did. He made choices too, another free radical in the stew."*

"But if I had not warned him as I did, he might have died as in our history."

"If, maybe, perhaps." Kamenski held up his hands. *"Nothing is certain, Fedorov. Things happen, and all this history we now find ourselves reading about in those books and newspapers is the result of millions of tiny choices and actions taken by people all over the world. Yes, we single out a few and claim they are the ones that matter, but I have not found that to be the case. We want certainty. We make big plans and hope things will all turn out well, but life seldom cooperates. Just when you think you have it all tied off and*

ready to slip into a drawer, the story continues. It resists resolution. It evolves to something new.”

“But I must be responsible for the things I caused.”

“Did you cause them? I wonder. This is where you make your mistake in thinking about all of this. The dots **seem** to be connected. You want to move from point A to point B and feel that one thing caused another, but it does not work like that. It’s human nature, I suppose. We want everything tidy, with a nice beginning, middle and end. Believe me, I was in the same distress you were in when I first found my history books were telling me lies. Things change, Mister Fedorov. Things begin from unseen causes. They spin off in unexpected directions. They end up places no one ever thinks they could go. Look at this ship and crew for the truth of that. You see, there are no happy endings in stories like this. Things just continue. They go on and on, just like this little adventure you have all found yourselves in these many months. This isn’t just your story, it’s everyone’s story, yours, mine, the whole world’s. Yes, you have your part to play, but there are other actors on the stage, and they speak for themselves.”

And here was a man with a leading role to be sure, thought Fedorov. Yes, Kamenski had been correct. Karpov was a Prime Mover on all these events. He corrupted Orlov, caused his alienation, which sent him off on that helicopter... One dot seemed to lead to another, but he could never be certain the line of causality was that secure.

“Why, Fedorov? What were you thinking when you hatched that little plot?”

“That should be obvious,” said Fedorov. “Ilanskiy is dangerous—you and I both know that.” Kamenski’s warning was still in his mind...

“What would a man like Karpov, or Volkov do with the power that stairway represents?” Kamenski had been thinking out loud. “Would they go forward to escape this mad world? Yet what if they had grown all too comfortable running things here, then what? Would they go up those stairs and bring things back... Weapons? Technology? Or perhaps they might simply have a look at how things might turn out?”

“Or worse,” Fedorov had said. “What if someone goes **down** those stairs, returning to 1908 to start this all over again? That stairway represents a very grave risk. It must not be discovered or ever used again by either of these men.”

“You wanted to close that breach in time,” said Karpov. “Don’t you

realize the power that now represents?”

“Of course I do,” said Fedorov. “But, if you want the truth, I also thought I could get Volkov.”

“Volkov? You wanted to get that little rat by the tail? Tell me.”

“I thought we could get to him the moment he first appeared in the past, and then end this whole nightmare concerning Orenburg. It is clear what happened. He went looking for me on the Trans-Siberian Rail, only that was in 2021. I was on that rail, making my way west to find Orlov, but I was doing so in 1942. And yet... call it fate, or simply random chance, Volkov came to that very same railway inn I found at Ilanskiy. I suppose the place is too small for a man to visit and not eventually find that stairway. That is how we think Volkov got back to 1908.”

“Correct,” said Karpov. “He told me as much when I met with him over that nasty business at Omsk. So you thought Troyak would collar him for you?”

“That was in the plan,” said Fedorov. “But I lost my nerve, or rather thought twice about it all, and it may be a good thing that I did so.”

“What do you mean?” Karpov was reaching into his jacket pocket for a cigarette, then waited, realizing they were in a very small room here.

“I mean Paradox, and that is an experience we’ve both been through. I was waiting for word on that mission, unable to sleep, then I realized that if Troyak did get Volkov, and bring him back up those stairs, this entire world could change in that same instant. I mean... everything. What would happen to it all—the troops facing off along the Volga, all the history from 1908 until now that Volkov had a hand in? It could be catastrophic. Beyond that, there would be Troyak, probably not even knowing why he was there, because there would have been no reason for me to ever send him. Understand?”

Karpov smiled. “Completely. Yes... I had the same thought. In fact. I’ve been on that stairway, Fedorov. The first time I went to Ilanskiy I took a little stroll, and you would not want to know what I saw. Remember our nice private war in 2021? It must have been well underway. I got to the top of those stairs and saw a mushroom cloud over Kansk, right where the Naval Arsenal should be. It scared the hell out of me, and I was back down those stairs as quick as my legs could move me. Yes, I thought I could get Volkov the very same way. I even threatened the man with exactly that outcome, which is probably why he’s launched yet another attack on Ilanskiy. No question about it, the place is perilous, but all power is dangerous, and this is

absolute power, Fedorov, absolute.”

“I thought I could have Troyak drag Volkov from 1908 to 1942, but then I realized that would be impossible. Volkov is already here.”

“That he is,” said Karpov. “He might have been there, in 1908, just as you suspected, but then again, we both know he is here, right in the middle of WWII. And guess what, he is also back home, in 2021. I sent Tyrenkov up those stairs for another reconnaissance. Strangely, he did not see what I saw there. In fact, he reached a point in time just as Volkov was arriving at Ilanskiy in his little search operation. I realized I could just send men up there and gun the man down.... Until the same thought you just related struck me like a brick. Suppose I do that. Then what happens here?”

“Paradox,” said Fedorov. “It’s the absolute peril in all of this. It started eating the ship and crew, Karpov. Men went missing, torn in half, their memories lost, as if none of this ever happened. It was terrifying. Who knows what might have happened if I let Troyak go down there after Volkov. So I decided to just blow the damn stairway to hell and leave it be. That’s what Volsky wanted to do. He said sometimes you just have to close a door and walk away. So that was the order.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “I thought Volkov tried to demolish my precious little railway inn, until I went over the evidence. Then I realized it was you. Volsky would have never conceived such an operation. You’ve been my nemesis all along, Fedorov.”

“And you mine. The only problem in that is that the whole damn world is between us, and we had better watch what we do.”

“Agreed,” said Karpov. “Frankly, I’m not sure what I could accomplish if I ever did decide to use that stairway again, or tried to send a man like Tyrenkov there in my place. You didn’t think Troyak could fetch Volkov to a place he already existed? Well, that was the same dilemma I faced when the ship was fated to arrive here again. As you can see, Time has a few things under her skirts we may not have seen. Here I stand, and yet, at this very same moment, my other self exists here as well, right there at Ilanskiy. This time it’s Volkov coming for that stairway. He knows what it means for him if I cast fate to the wind and go after him. By God... I hope my younger self prevails tonight. Now I’m standing in your shoes. You worried what I might do with the power that place represents, and justifiably so, because you’ve seen me wield absolute power when necessary. In like manner, I stand here petrified to think what Volkov would do if he and his men get to that inn.”

“We should hear something soon,” said Fedorov. “This may sound strange, but have faith in yourself.”

Karpov smiled. “I’ll beat that bastard,” he said defiantly. “My Brother will stop him at Ilanskiy, and then I’ll get busy with the rest of the job, as soon as I settle affairs with the Japanese. “I’ll see him burn if it’s the last thing I do.”

“At least we understand one another,” said Fedorov.

“We do,” said Karpov, “because we share the same fear, at least in one respect. But there is still a difference between us. You thought at first that you could undo all Volkov’s mischief, reset the clock as it were. Behind that was your wish to preserve the old history, but to do that you had to use that absolute power to smash and obliterate everything you see around us now—this entire world as it is presently ordered. You couldn’t do that, and so your fall back was to try and stop anyone else from ever trying to do so as well.”

“Yes, and then lo and behold, someone rebuilds that stairway!”

“Someone does,” Karpov smiled. “And now Volkov is desperate to close that door. But my fear is just a little different. You see, I’ve worked very hard to get where I am now. I’ve fought my battles and my demons both, and I daresay I’ve even defied time itself to be standing here now. I could have ordered Tyrenkov to finish Volkov off, but then I realized I would be undoing everything I’ve built here. It wasn’t *the* world I was afraid of losing, it was *my* world. That may sound self-centered, but there it is. Everything would change, and I was afraid that my place in that world would also change—who can say how? Somehow the thought of watching a great wave roll over my sand castle here was not as gratifying as all the time and effort I put into building it. You see? I wasn’t afraid of losing the world we’re standing in now—I was afraid of losing control over it. That’s my bailiwick and bane all rolled into one.”

Fedorov did not quite know how to take that. On the one hand he might have expected Karpov to think that way, on the other, it did little to assuage the fear in his own chest. Just how far would Karpov go to preserve this world—to preserve his desire to control it? And how far would he take that desire now that he was here aboard *Kirov* again, aboard the most powerful ship in the world? First he wanted to take Volsky’s place, and now he is his own self appointed Admiral, and head of the Free Siberian State. How far would it go?

“Karpov,” he said quietly. “That stairway is dangerous. It should be

destroyed. Don't you see that?"

"It is not any more dangerous than a high cliff, Fedorov. It's just a place like that, where you have to watch your step. Ilanskiy is not dangerous..... But I am. Volkov isn't trying to destroy that railway inn tonight. He's trying to destroy me, so he can preserve *his* little world, and all the control he thinks he has over it. You see, we are somewhat the same, but with only one difference."

"What is that?" asked Fedorov.

"I'm going to win, and he's going to lose. That's no idle boast. Because it isn't about Fate and Time any longer, nor does the will of God have anything to do with it. My will decides the matter now, and that is the way it will be."

Fedorov did not know quite what to make of that. "And after you've won?" he said.

Karpov said nothing more, but Fedorov thought he saw something in his eyes that he did not quite expect. It wasn't the gleam of satisfaction, or the pride of triumph. It was sadness, a quiet lonesome feeling that seemed to fall over the man like a shroud draped on his rounded shoulders.

Chapter 20

So *Kirov* turned away, leaving *Akagi* to limp on to Truk. As for Nagumo, his sword had been shattered, and now he would return home with only three operational fleet carriers from the six he was entrusted. It was only then, in a meeting with Yamamoto at Tokyo, that he learned of the demands being made by the Siberians.

“You mean to say we were attacked by a Siberian warship? This is outrageous!”

“You heard the rumors last year when I did,” said Yamamoto, “and I trust you have also read the intelligence reports. We believe this is the same ship that has confounded the Germans in the Atlantic—the one that also sank their aircraft carrier. It has a rocket weapon of great range and accuracy.”

“I have seen it with my own eyes,” said Nagumo, “but I would not have believed it possible had that not been the case. Reading reports and listening to rumors is one thing, watching that weapon strike our ships quite another. I can understand why the lower ranks now whisper of *Raiju* and *Mizuchi*. The weapon is deadly, and terribly accurate. It must be piloted to strike us with such unfailing accuracy, and its speed was beyond belief. The gunners could not even take aim before it danced away, with maneuvers that would be impossible for any plane we have. *Akagi* was lucky that none of her planes were armed and fueled when the first attack came in. *Hiryu* was not so fortunate. It was just beginning launch operations.”

“And yet you brought the rest of your forces home safely.”

“Only by turning and running south,” said Nagumo with the shame obvious in his voice. “Masuda Shogo and Fuchida wanted me to strike, and I did so, even with daylight fading. Something tells me that it was fortunate our planes did not find the enemy that day. I have also read the reports concerning the smaller rocket weapons used against aircraft. We lost three planes in that manner during our initial search, and then more from the strike wave. The only caveat we have is that when the enemy uses these weapons, the contrails in the sky lead us directly to the firing ship. In this case, darkness frustrated our search effort, and I ordered Fuchida to bring the planes home. Now the men speak of ghosts and demons. We were humbled by a ship we could not even sight, let alone attack. Yet somehow, they knew exactly where we were—exactly. It was a most difficult time. When I turned

south, and at high speed, no man on the bridge said anything, but I could feel what they all felt. We were running.”

“Every good commander must know how and when to make a skillful retreat,” said Yamamoto, trying to give his fighting Admiral back some face. “I would have done the same in your situation, in fact, had the matter been before me, I would have ordered it. We may have lost the Flying Dragon, but you brought home three fleet carriers in good shape, and two others will be repaired. It is high time we extend that flight deck all the way to *Akagi*’s bow. I will order her home from Truk to Hashirajima. *Kaga* as well. Both of those old ladies can use a good refit. In fact, the work on *Akagi* was already scheduled right after this operation, so things are not as bad as they seem. In the meantime, *Tosa* will be assigned to Carrier Division 2 in place of *Hiryu*.”

“You are too kind, Admiral. I bear the full responsibility for the losses we have suffered. The presence of those enemy battleships and carriers at sea should have been discovered, but we were too single-mindedly focused on Pearl Harbor.”

“One must always expect the unexpected,” said Yamamoto. “In this case, who could have expected the Siberians to intervene as they did? They had no navy to speak of.”

“What about the demands they have made?”

“What about them?” Yamamoto folded his hands. “Neither Tojo nor the Emperor is about to simply hand them back all the territories we have been sitting on for thirty years. So it is war, with Siberia and the United States. We knew this would be the likely outcome of our attack. In this event, Urajio is now more important than ever. The Army has made it their primary port for supporting the Kwangtung Group. The Siberians used the element of surprise to attack us as they did. We know the advantage of that, but there is little else they can do on land. Yet one thing was disturbing about the action off Hawaii. We have learned the Siberians radioed a warning to the Americans, giving them the exact position of the *Kido Butai* on the morning of December 7th. This was most likely how the Americans were able to move their carriers and some of those battleships out of the harbor and operate against you.”

“If that was the case,” said Nagumo, “then why were they so ill prepared when our first strike wave came in?”

“Yes, that seems odd, but you nonetheless achieved surprise over the harbor, in spite of the intelligence failure that led to that warning. We failed to properly conceal our plans from every potential enemy. Who can say how

the Siberians learned of our movements, but they did. That must be addressed before our next planned offensive operation.”

“None of that excuses my failure to find those enemy ships at sea,” said Nagumo. “For that lapse, both *Kaga* and *Hiei* have limped off to Kwajalein.”

“Yet you sunk the *Lexington*, and also put hits on at least two of their battleships at sea.”

“I should have sunk them all, but, having achieved our objective at Pearl Harbor, my mind was set on a safe withdrawal. It was shameful, particularly after we were attacked again, and this time by a third rate power that has been our serving boy for thirty years.”

“You are too hard on yourself,” said Yamamoto. “Things happen in battle that can foil the best laid plans. Take a lesson from this and hold your head high. I cannot tolerate gloom and doom just now. This is our hour. We have achieved a good victory, but there will be much more to accomplish in the months ahead. For now, with most of our amphibious landings completed, the offensive lies with the Army on the ground.”

“I have heard there was trouble in the New Hebrides,” said Nagumo.

“The French tried to intercept an American convoy bound for Australia.” Yamamoto indicated the position on the table map. “Apparently the Americans used those two light battle carriers we spotted at Mindanao to good effect. They fled south, possibly to cover the movement of this supply convoy. The French went after them, and lost their only carrier.”

“And *Hiyo*?”

“It is back at Noumea, with engine damage, but that will also be repaired. Yet that action brings the entire question of Australia into sharp focus. The Ichiki Regiment was safely delivered to Noumea, which will now be a knife at the enemy’s throat. It is right astride their lines of communications to Australia, but between that place and Truk, we have no secure positions. The offensive into Southeast Asia and the Solomons will now become the top priority for the Navy.”

“You wish to move to the second operational phase soon?”

“Immediately. As a result of the smooth progress of the first-phase operations, we have established an invincible strategic position that cannot be maintained if we go on the defensive now. The Operations in Borneo and the Dutch East Indies will proceed as planned, but we must also look to our outer perimeter. In order to secure it tenaciously, we must keep on striking offensively at the enemy's weak points one after another.”

“How will we proceed?” Nagumo leaned over the map.

“The first step will be Rabaul as planned, but I am canceling your Indian Ocean operation. We need to use Carrier Division 5 now in the Solomons. *Gozo* and *Mezu* are at Truk, but they carry only 24 planes each. I wish to occupy New Britain and Bougainville as soon as possible. Then we must push on to New Georgia, the lower Solomons, and possibly even as far as the Santa Cruz Islands. That operation will allow us to build a land bridge of good airfields and anchorages to Noumea on New Caledonia, but it will need substantial carrier based air support at the outset.”

“Can we conclude all these operations before May? What about the plan for Midway?”

“At the moment, it is of secondary importance. It was only intended to challenge the Americans so we could complete the destruction of their fleet. We must isolate Australia before considering the Midway operation, or any significant move into the Aleutians. Your pilots performed bravely, and the sinking of the carrier *Lexington* was perhaps the strongest blow we landed at Hawaii. That said, we have learned that their carrier *Saratoga* is now moving to Pearl Harbor. We can also anticipate that they will send reinforcements from their Atlantic fleet. So I expect our moves into the Solomons will be opposed. Ready yourself for that. But first, I want you to take the 5th Carrier Division back out again to support Operation R against Rabaul.”

“Has there been any change in enemy dispositions?”

“Not much to speak of. The Australians dispatched a single battalion, apparently to defend their air base at Vunakanau near Rabaul. They also have a few flying boats at the nearby Simpson Harbor, and those should be destroyed immediately. There will be little air opposition. We have identified only a small squadron of perhaps ten obsolete fighters at that airfield, and four old twin engine bombers. Guam is now secure, so we will utilize General Tomitaro Horii’s troops for the follow up landings at Rabaul. The 144th Regiment was retained with 55th Division for the Burma operation.”

“Then what will we use for the initial landing at Rabaul?”

“I still have forces equivalent to a full brigade at Truk,” said Yamamoto. The 2nd and 5th Sasebo SNLF and two *Teishin* airborne battalions.”

“*Teishin*? Those are air force troops.”

“Yes, but Yamashita tells me our own Yokosuka Para Battalion was very useful in his Malaya operation. The air force has offered them to replace the 144th Regiment, and we will have 60 Ki-56 light transport planes to carry

them. They have been ferrying additional supplies to Truk, and will soon be available for operations.”

“Very well,” said Nagumo. “I foresee no difficulty in completing Operation R successfully. Yet we should also clear enemy resistance in New Guinea. There are good sites for airfields there, and we must not allow the Australians to retain their position at Port Moresby.”

“Agreed,” said Yamamoto. “I will watch the progress of our thrust into the Dutch colonies very closely. The Island of Java will be the end point of those operations, and set the lower boundary of our defensive perimeter there. Yamashita must also occupy Singapore as planned. Then, once we are well established on Java, we can consider an expanded attack on both Port Moresby, and perhaps even Port Darwin. For now, Rabaul and New Britain will be your next objective.”

“When am I to leave?”

“As soon as 5th Carrier Division can replenish. I will depart for Truk myself in a few days time, and *Yamato* will be moved there as the new Fleet headquarters at sea.”

“That will be a most welcome addition,” said Nagumo.

“Considering that we have just shown how easy it is to sink battleships with aircraft, I sometimes wonder.” Yamamoto hedged his bet, but Nagumo disagreed.

“Those old American battleships at Pearl Harbor were nothing more than nice fat targets. They are nothing like *Yamato*, and at sea, under a full head of steam, she would not be so vulnerable.”

“I suppose this war will answer that question one day,” said Yamamoto. “As long as our carrier based aircraft can rule the skies over the sea, then our battleships may move about with impunity. One day, however, that may change. At the moment, I want you to light a fire in the Solomons. Run wild, Nagumo. Hit hard, and always keep moving.”

“What if the Americans do oppose me with their fleet carriers?”

“Then fight. We have the best ships, planes and pilots in the world. 5th Carrier Division has *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, our newest and most advance carriers. I know you will be eager to redress what you perceive as a failure in that last battle. But now is not the time to look over your shoulder with any regret. The next battle awaits you. That is where you must focus your thoughts.”

Nagumo nodded, and there was silence between the two men for some

time before he spoke again. "Admiral Yamamoto... Siberia is a beaten and backward nation. We have had them under our foot since 1908. How in the world did they produce such advanced rocket weapons, when our own programs are so far behind? And this ship? They have no major ports, no dry docks. Where did it come from?"

"We believe it was built by the Soviets. It was at Murmansk in September, then it moved east through the Arctic passage before the ice closed in. This is how we believe it came to the Pacific."

"The Soviets? Then they have these rocket weapons? They are responsible?"

"We believe so."

"And if they give this technology to the Americans?"

Yamamoto reached up, rubbing his chin, but said nothing more. He would take to the high seas aboard Japan's mightiest battleship, ordering that *Akagi* was to wait in the lagoon at Truk until his arrival. Once there, he boarded the venerable carrier to survey the damage, and discuss repairs and the upcoming refit with the engineers.

Before he left, he produced a list of all men lost in the sortie he had so long advocated against the Americans at Pearl Harbor. There were the names of the pilots and crews, men of the fabled Misty Lagoon. Some had died on this very ship, others on *Kaga*, and a great many more aboard *Hiryu*. True to his word, he ordered that all their names should be engraved on a brass plate and affixed to the wall, and that if ever this ship were in jeopardy of sinking, it was to be unbolted and removed, along with the portrait of the Emperor. Then he ordered the men out, and for a long time, he sat alone, silently reading the names upon that list, seeing their faces in his mind, hearing their voices, and taking upon himself the responsibility for each and every lost soul.

Chapter 21

While Yamamoto kept his silent vigil, half a world away, the Americans were also making plans of their own. Admiral Halsey's lonesome watch with the *Enterprise* was relieved with the arrival of the *Saratoga*, another big *Lexington* class carrier that had once been designed as a battlecruiser. He was also heartened by the news that *Yorktown* was arriving on December 20th, escorted by the destroyers *Russel*, *Walke* and *Simms*. Trailing in her wake was yet another ship, the *Kitty Hawk*, one of many logistical support vessels that would make the United States Navy such an efficient and formidable foe in the years to come.

The *Kitty Hawk* class was a special breed, over 16,000 tons fully loaded, and originally designed to transport commercial railway cars. The Navy saw them as perfect transports for crated aircraft and other equipment, and they could carry up to 120 planes in that capacity, and make a respectable 17 knots. They threw on a single 5-inch gun, four .50 caliber machineguns, and stuffed the ship full of planes for the carrier division. Two such ships were in the Pacific, the *Kitty Hawk* and *Hammondsport*.

Rear Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher brought the *Yorktown* in, and now he was meeting with Halsey to discuss the situation they faced in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. An Iowa man from a Navy family, Fletcher graduated near the top of his academy class in 1906. He commanded a destroyer in the first war, won a medal of Honor at Vera Cruz, Mexico, and then was given the battleship *New Mexico* for a time before he moved on to command a Cruiser Division.

"Hell of a situation here," said Halsey. They were meeting aboard the *Enterprise*, berthed that night to replenish at Pearl. There was really no other suitable office ashore, for the entirety of CINCPAC headquarters had been destroyed in the awful fire resulting from the catastrophic explosion of the tanker *Neosho*. Fletcher had been shocked when he finally saw the damage.

"Couldn't believe my eyes," he said. "Thank God Battleship Division 1 was out to sea with your operation."

"We might have been sitting right here had it not been for Newton wanting that fleet exercise," said Halsey. "It put both our carriers right in the ring. Van Falkenburgh's old ladies too."

"I heard they gave the Japs a bloody nose."

Out gunned them and set two of their battlewagons on fire," said Halsey.

“But they were too damn slow to close in and finish the job, and we had our hands full tangling with all those enemy carriers.”

“Damn shame we lost *Lexington*,” said Fletcher.

“That and the mess out there near Merry Point is where they really hurt us. I just heard the Navy is sending us Battleship Division 3 from the Atlantic. I asked for cruisers—I get more fat slow battleships instead.”

“Pye should be happy.”

Halsey gave him a look. “Haven’t you heard? Pye was at CINCPAC headquarters when the *Neosho* blew up. He didn’t make it out of there.”

“Sorry to hear that, sir.”

“Right... Well, when they get here we’ll have more battleships than we did before the Japs bombed the place, but with one catch. I just can’t use them now. They’re too slow, and they’ll need too much fuel to operate. That’s a commodity we may soon find in short supply. That fire ate up 42% of everything we had bunkered. So we’re going to have to be stingy.”

“It won’t be your problem long, Bull,” said Fletcher. “Nimitz is flying in to take over out here.”

“Good,” said Halsey. “The last place I’d want to be is sitting in that pile of rubble over there behind the one desk they manage to dig up for me. There’s work to be done at sea, and that’s where I belong. The effort now is to support Wake and Midway as long as we can. Everything was destroyed at CINCPAC, including all those nice little war plans filed away. You’ve read them. One was supposed to have us out there trying to lay an ambush for the Japs at Wake. Well, we haven’t the luxury of that kind of thinking right now. The time will come for that kind of finesse, but for now, we’re playing defense. The only problem we have is logistics. We’ll need to build forward bases out here, and I’ve just returned from the operation out to Bora Bora. The French didn’t like it, but the place is now ours. We’ll make it a forward depot for operations into the South Pacific, assuming we can find the fuel, and ships to carry it. I requested tanker support, but it may be a while getting here.”

“They’re sending another *Cimarron* class ship,” said Fletcher. “The *Guadalupe* should be here by New Year’s Day.”

“I hope they pumped in oil and not Champagne.”

“That they did, sir.”

“Fair enough. I could use a good stiff drink right about now, but first things first. I’ve got a job for you—Wake Island. Our boys repulsed a

Japanese landing attempt last week, but they won't give it up. So we need to get out there with a relief mission. We've got one tanker available to support operations, the *Netches*. Lucky for us that ship was en-route to Pearl when they hit us. She'll only make 14 knots, so you'll have to leave her in your wake most of the time with a couple destroyers, but keep an eye on her. We can't afford to lose another tanker."

"But sir," said Fletcher haltingly. "You can see these nice black shoes I'm wearing here. I'm a cruiser man. I haven't any experience driving carriers. In fact, I thought they just stuck me on *Yorktown* for the ride."

"Look Jack, we also lost Wil Brown in that fire, so they sent you out here for a reason. Yes, I know the navy aviators get a hair up their ass whenever they don't see an Admiral with gold wings on his chest commanding a carrier. Fitch can handle *Saratoga* with TF 11. I get the *Enterprise* with TF 8, and I want you to stay with *Yorktown* and TF 17. Nimitz recommended you, and the job is yours. Between the three of us, we'll have enough clout to at least enforce security here in the Central Pacific."

"Alright sir. If you and Nimitz want me, I'm happy to serve."

"Good. I was going to give you *Indianapolis*, *Chicago* and *Portland*, but the last two got roughed up a bit and repairs are still underway. Don't worry. I'll find something for you. If you want the truth, I knew that Nimitz was flying in, and actually spoke with him just last week. In fact, I asked for you directly—and for more cruisers so I can keep you happy. *Richmond* pulled into Pearl on the 10th, and they're sending us a new air defense cruiser, the *Atlanta*. God only knows when. Until then I'll see what else I can find. That said, job one for us now is to lend a hand at Wake, and cover Midway. But there's one other thing we need to discuss."

"I'm all ears," said Fletcher.

"Code and Signals section says they got an earful the other day. Apparently there was some kind of ruckus northwest of Wake."

"Northwest? Nothing much out there, except Marcus Island."

"It was much closer in. In fact, the boys on Wake picked it up too. There was a fight underway, that much was clear, but we didn't get an invitation. It wasn't any of our subs either, so this is a bit of a mystery. All we know is that the code crowd thinks it was the Japanese main body, the same group that hit us at Pearl, and after this engagement, they hightailed it for Japan. One of our subs spotted them on the way. There were only three carriers."

“Three? The reports I read said they hit us with six.”

We know they sent one carrier to Kwajalein, and now they’ve sent another to Truk, but that still leaves one carrier unaccounted for.”

“Then you think they took damage in that engagement?”

“Seems that way, though I’d like to think they’re still shaking off the punches we landed on them when they hit Pearl. But the signals troop thinks something else happened. They think there was a scrap up there northwest of Wake, and I’ll be damned if I can figure out who might have had the balls to tangle with them—or the ships! It certainly wasn’t a commonwealth battlegroup.”

“It does smell fishy,” said Fletcher.

“Well, I just wanted you to know about it. Keep your eyes open, and run good search routines. That carrier might still be out there somewhere. We can’t write it off just yet.”

“That would be a good assumption,” said Fletcher. “So what happened with the *Pensacola*?”

“The damn French got in on the game, that’s what happened,” said Halsey, “and we gave them a black eye. *Antietam* and *Shiloh* were at Mindanao, and someone had the good sense to order them out of there when this thing started. That someone was me, of course. Well, they were headed for Fiji, and showed us just in time to head off that French task force, and the Frogs had a carrier. Jimmy Hansen was out there on the *Antietam*, and damn if they didn’t stick it to that French flattop.”

“Good for them.”

“Unfortunately, the Japanese showed up soon after. We’ve got more trouble than we realize now. They were running a troop convoy down to New Caledonia, and the escort carriers tagging along mixed it up with Hansen’s group. *Antietam* got hit, but she’s still haze grey and underway. I’m calling that group home to Pearl. They can patch up and then escort the marines out to Samoa and Fiji. That’ll leave our three fleet carriers free for independent operations. The thing is this. If the Japs moved troops to Noumea, you know damn well they can’t just leave it at that. They’d be out there like ripe fruit—really out on a limb. So I’m thinking they’ll need to move into the Solomons soon to support that forward base. Nimitz agrees.”

“Sounds logical,” said Fletcher.

“And also dangerous,” said Halsey. “Jack.... That’s where we’ll have to meet them, right there in the Solomons. There’s a whole string of islands out

there up for grabs, and we need to get in on the action before they take all that prime real estate and set up shop. Something tells me that if we can stop them there, then we can turn this mess around and get moving again.”

“The Aussies will be happy to hear that,” said Fletcher.

“Yes they will,” Halsey nodded. “Because if we don’t stop them there, then Australia is next. We can’t lose them, they’re too damn valuable. The Aussies are the only thing stalling the Japanese drive on Singapore now. So once we get thing squared away, our primary strategic mission is to keep the lines of communication open to Australia. If we lose Australia, then this thing just might get out of hand. Believe me, if someone as dumb as me knows that, then the Japanese certainly know it too. So we can’t drop the ball. If we do, who’s going to spank Tojo? Certainly not the Siberians.”

The two men had a good laugh at that, but for another man, it would soon be no laughing matter. He was determined to make a difference in this affair, and had the means of doing so, along with a plan.

* * *

“**Alright,**” said Karpov. “Plot me a course for the Sea of Okhotsk. We’re going to begin operations on Kamchatka and Sakhalin Island. Those territories will be the first to be liberated, and if the Japanese want to try and reinforce them, they’ll pay the price.”

“How can you possibly operate against those places?” asked Fedorov. “It is nearly 2000 kilometers from Magadan to Yakutsk, and that’s on an unpaved road that can only be used when it is frozen in winter.”

“Correct,” said Karpov, “but you forget my airship fleet. I’ve had the Far East Airship Division moving troops to Magadan for some time, and if my brother can deal with Volkov, the balance of power could change. Then I would have more airships I can devote to strategic movement of land forces. I have enough lift now to carry a full brigade. The transport ships from Magadan can move the rest.”

“But those airships can only provide limited air support against the Japanese. What if they move squadrons of fighters to oppose you?”

“They can try, but with *Kirov* at hand, I can project a lethal air defense umbrella over any chosen landing zone. And do not write off my airships so quickly. They are vulnerable to heavier guns, but not the typical machineguns most fighters carry. We have amazing self-sealing gas bag linings. I’ve

assembled a nice little fleet at Magadan—five destroyers, over 20 transport ships, icebreakers, and a full division in reserve. Another will be raised shortly.”

“Then you are planning an offensive against Japanese held territories?”

“Where else? I have opened negotiations with the Americans, and I am trying to persuade them to support me as they did with the British in those lend-lease convoys. I have the gold to pay for anything they will sell me. The gold mines near Magadan will provide anything I need. At the moment, the Japanese presence in Kamchatka is very weak, and they don’t have much more than a few battalions on Sakhalin Island. They simply do not think we pose any threat, which is why they ignore me now, though they may think twice after they see their flagship limp home. I have an operation all ready to go, under the code name Plan 7. It was triggered the moment Volkov decided to strike at Ilanskiy again. We’ve been preparing an offensive for a good long while, in spite of all the troops I’ve sent Sergei Kirov. We’re going to hit them, and let them know we mean business. Once I show the Americans I can take and hold territory, and then offer them airfields for their bombers on Kamchatka and Sakhalin Island, you will see how things change.”

Fedorov nodded, seeing Karpov with new eyes now. The man had a strategic plan. He had been husbanding resources, troops, weapons, supplies, transport shipping, and he was planning to stage a daring attack somewhere that was very likely to succeed, unless the Japanese got wind of it.

“So this is why you are not dead set on pursuing the *Kido Butai*.”

“Correct. I’ve done what I intended here. I’ve declared war, made my demands, initiated hostilities, and shown them just how powerless they are against *Kirov*. I don’t suppose they even know what they are up against, but they will certainly know *who* they are facing in battle soon enough. Once I establish a secure lodgment, clear Kamchatka and Sakhalin, then they will sit up and take real notice. That’s when my little war with the Japanese really starts. In the meantime, see if Nikolin has any signals intercepts. I’ve got to find out what has happened at Ilanskiy.”

Part VIII

Rain of Fire

“If you're going to try, go all the way. There is no other feeling like that. You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire... It's the only good fight there is.”

—**Charles Bukowski**, *Factorum*

Chapter 22

Like all plans it was risky, even daring, in spite of ever effort to make it seem certain. It had been tried twice before, the first merely a mission born more of curiosity and spite than anything else. Ivan Volkov wanted to know why there seemed to be a slow accumulation of men and material at a small hamlet in Siberia, far behind the front. And he wanted to get rid of a troublesome airship Captain at the same time. That mission, ill equipped as it was, might have discovered something quite unexpected there at Ilanskiy, a prize worth more than a hundred divisions, and one far more powerful, in fact, than all the armies on this earth.

Yet other men had also come that day, their minds and strong arms fixed on destroying that prize. They foiled Volkov's first foray, saw him lose his two airships, and destroyed that prize, at least for a time. It was not really understood. After that raid, Vladimir Karpov sought out the men who had built that humdrum railway inn, and gathered the best carpenters and engineers he could find to build it anew.

The second raid was much more purposeful, supported by three airship divisions and carrying a full regiment into battle. Yet it was foiled by the sudden and unexpected arrival of Vladimir Karpov on his newest and most powerful airship. The ensuing battle saw six airships fall on Orenburg's side, three on the Siberian side, and almost dropped the General Secretary of the Orenburg Federation into Karpov's hands. Volkov escaped by the narrowest margin, steaming and planning ever since that defeat to come to this battlefield again.

Third time is the charm, or so it is said. All the mistakes of the previous two missions were analyzed and discussed by the Admirals and Generals. The element of surprise had been turned against them, they had insufficient supply, one airship division had been late to the field of battle, their covering ground support fire was caught up in the airship duel... The list was a long one. Thus their plan was now bigger and more elaborate than the other two combined. Now the full might of the Orenburg Air Corps would be dispatched, all of 16 airships. They would carry a reinforced regiment to the scene as before, but behind them would come over 300 German transport planes carrying another full air landing division to the airfields near Kansk, if they could be secured in a timely manner.

That was the first risk in this plan, that and the weather itself. December in Siberia was harsh and cold. Both men and equipment would suffer, and the airships could not brave the high altitudes where they would normally cruise. Instead they would come in low, hoping to hover and quickly dispatch their initial assault regiment to begin the attack on key objectives.

There were two airfields at Kansk, the larger settlement west of Ilanskiy on the Trans-Siberian rail line. Four high mooring towers for the Siberian airship fleet had been constructed, with three more at Ilanskiy, one for each of the ships still active in the Siberian fleet. Karpov was making this the center of his fleet operations, his Pearl Harbor in the endless stretches of Siberian wilderness, and just as the Japanese fleet received their orders to attack, the airships of Orenburg were climbing slowly away from their long shadows, heading east like a massive pod of whales.

Securing those vital airfields was the first objective. Unless this could be done quickly, the forces of Orenburg could not build up enough strength on the ground to carry the day. Geography would also pose a challenge to the attack planners. Kansk was on the western side of the Kan River, with marshy banks and few good bridges. Ilanskiy itself was flanked on the east by a massive bog. This was one reason Volkov and his generals had decided to attack in December, in spite of the bad weather. The cold would freeze those rivers and bogs, making those imposing terrain barriers crossable.

Yet the fact that two of the three airfields that would receive reinforcements and supplies were in the west at Kansk, still meant that all those troops landing there would have to move 15 miles over land to the main objective at Ilanskiy. The Siberians would also have reinforcements arriving from both east and west on the Siberian rail line, so selected teams would have to set up blocking positions, destroy the line, and serve as a delaying force. It would not be enough to simply take Kansk and then move east from that town to Ilanskiy. Kansk would have to be held, for those airfields would be needed for the second lift, bringing the vital supplies in that the troops would need for battle. And they would also be essential should the mission call for any withdrawal.

To task a single reinforced division with all these objectives, and the responsibility of controlling the entire battle zone between Kansk and Ilanskiy, was stretching the limits of what might be militarily possible. But Volkov was determined to do just one thing with this assault, get to that railway inn and destroy it. He had contemplated trying to go there again

himself, and cast his fate to the wind on that back stairway, but then realized that the unknowns were simply too great. This time he merely meant to strike that weapon from his enemy's hand, undoing all of Karpov's careful planning and engineering, and laying waste to his enemy's airship fleet at the same time.

The plan had designated seven assault landing zones throughout the sector, as close to those airfields and key objectives as planners could find them. The airships were useful in delivering troops to the ground, but they would be very vulnerable to enemy artillery or heavy flak guns while hovering low for an unloading operation. So the sites had been placed out of range of the enemy guns, their position carefully noted by a man captured in the second raid, Volkov's old Intelligence Chief Kymchek. He had "turned" to avoid a pounding by Grilikov, but still remained loyal to his old boss, and was secretly signaling operatives and agents in the region, and sending back information on the garrison strength and deployments of Siberian troops at Ilanskiy and Kansk.

That defense would see a full Siberian Rifle Division on hand, the fighting 78th. One regiment was at Kansk, beefing up the garrison troops there. The 131st was fully motorized, so that it could move quickly along the roads to Ilanskiy if ever needed there. That smaller town had two regiments, one the 40th Siberian Rifles and another more elite force in the 11th Siberian Guards. The third regiment of the 78th was 15 miles further east at Nizhny Ingash, where they had been improving the rail line, expanding the depot, and laying in supplies for the division.

Karpov left three airships on permanent station. The heavy cruiser *Talmenka* was moored on tower number 1 at Kansk, very close to the north airfield there. To other A-Class cruisers, *Angara* and *Abakan*, were moored on towers 5 and 6 at Ilanskiy. The former was close to the airfield just north of the town, and the latter on the banks of the great bog that flanked it to the east. That would put it right near the vital railway inn, which would be within range of its recoilless rifles.

Sixteen to three seemed the overwhelming odds that Volkov was counting on, but the Siberian fleet had been strongly reinforced when Sergei Kirov gladly sent every airship he had in exchange for the Siberian divisions that were now struggling with the Germans near Moscow. *Narva*, *Riga* and *Orel* had accompanied *Tunguska* for a time, then moved in and out of Ilanskiy, relieving the three airships there on occasion. The fleet would swap

those two divisions between that point, and Irkutsk on Lake Baikal, the Far East Front against the Japanese.

Two more airships were en-route from the far south, *Odessa* and *Rostov*, the latter to be renamed *Omsk* by Karpov when it joined the fleet, as he had plans to get that city back from Volkov in short order. Then there was the latest addition to the fleet, *Baikal*, the second *Tunguska* class ship fresh off the assembly lines. Two more units from the old fleet were on permanent station at Irkutsk, the original flagship named for that city, and the *Novosibirsk*. They were big ships, like the venerable old ship destroyed in the last battle here, Big Red, but they still had a lot of firepower.

That was Karpov's real edge. His airships were bigger and better gunned than those of the Orenburg fleet, which had lost its largest and most powerful ship when the flagship *Orenburg* went down with Big Red, nearly taking Volkov to a fiery death along with it. If the entire Siberian fleet could be gathered here, it would make the odds sixteen to twelve, and the edge in Siberian firepower made that almost even when recoilless rifles were totaled. Volkov was counting on surprise again, and hoping to chop up the Siberians in detail, destroying the fleet garrison ships first, then overwhelming reinforcing units as they arrived.

The early hours might favor Orenburg in the air, though the initial assault regiment would face steep odds until that air landing division could deploy through the airfields. Whether the plan included enough force to achieve its single objective now remained to be seen. Even if they did succeed, Volkov knew that there would be nothing to prevent Karpov from rebuilding that inn again.

He knew he could never really take it and hold it, but by destroying it he was buying valuable time, neutralizing one Ace in his enemy's hand, if only for a while. Like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he also hoped to lay waste to the enemy fleet, and the facilities they had built here to support it. That would neutralize Karpov as a mobile threat for at least six months. In that interval, his hope was also on the advance of Manstein and Steiner's SS Korps in the south. If they could link up, he hoped he might finally convince Karpov that his struggle on the Soviet side was futile. Had he truly taken the measure of his enemy, he would have realized that was a foolhardy thought. Yet it is said that fools rush in, where angels fear to tread, and that operation was now about to get underway, a few weeks after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

So the Admirals and generals argued over the plan for some time after Volkov secured those transports from Germany. The navy was confident it could now deliver air superiority, but the army was nervous. The plan had but one heavy assault regiment that could be lifted by the sixteen airships. Originally it had been split with separate battalions targeting both Ilanskiy and Kansk, but one General opposed the plan, saying the entire force should be committed to Kansk at the outset, its sole aim being to get those two vital airfields.

Another General thundered that they should simply drop the entire assault regiment at Ilanskiy, blow up that railway inn and be done with it, but the failure of that approach in the last raid saw it discarded. Eventually, the more cautious plan was adopted—get the airfields at Kansk, isolate and destroy that garrison, then build up and move east, hoping blocking forces on the rail line east would delay enemy reinforcements long enough to win the day.

‘Operation Firestorm’ was about to begin

They came in from the north, following a route that had been well chosen to avoid the air patrols and radar sites further west at Krasnoyarsk. They crossed the Yeseni River well north of that city, continuing east through heavy cloud cover that hid even the massive bulk of the fleet. About 45 minutes later they made the final turn south an hour before sunrise, even as the bows of the carriers in the *Kido Butai* were also turning for the final run down to Pearl Harbor. It was not long before they descended, seeming to form out of the slate grey mist and sky, solidifying from the heavy clouds as they fell.

In that early morning hour, the T-Class cruiser *Talmenka* was just finishing its pre-flight check on Tower 1, ready to begin its dawn patrol. Eight airships would soon converge, heading for the two designated Assault Landing Zones on either side of the river that meandered through Kansk. Six of the eight ships in those first two divisions would move to ground level and offload the assault teams, while the other two made directly for Tower 1, intent on smashing *Talmenka*.

Rifle companies off the *Kungur* and *Samara* were the first on the ground, sliding rapidly down the long assault ropes that now dangled like dark trailing tentacles from some great jellyfish above. They formed up, the shrill whistles of the Lieutenants followed by the growl of noncoms, and within minutes they were racing towards the west end airfield, Kansk North.

In the distance, a warning bell began to ring, prompting a Sergeant high up on Tower 1 to turn his head. The low ground mist was so thick that he could barely see the airfield a little over one kilometer to the west. But the early warning radar crews were finally reaching their stations to see a scope filled with blotches. The airships had come in as low as possible in their final approach, and should have been detected, but no one was watching.

Rifle squads of the 131st Motor Rifle Regiment were up and out of the farm houses that served as their quarters, bleary eyed, grabbing rifles and helmets, and rushing towards the airfield. High up on the tower, the Sergeant dropped his clip board pre-flight mooring checklist and ran to the nearest phone, cranking it and ringing up the bridge.

“Sir! There is something going on at the airfield. I can hear small arms fire.”

“Who is training this early?” came the irritated reply. “And they had better not be using live ammunition.”

“But sir, I do not think this is a training exercise. It sounds like the field is under attack!”

“Attack? From who? From where?”

As he said that the Captain on the other end of the line was distracted by another phone ringing, and now he heard hoarse shouting through the voice tubes. “*Airships sighted at twelve-o’clock!*”

His eyes registered surprise, then alarm. “Cast off all lines! Make ready to vent emergency ballast! All hands to battle stations! Prepare for rapid ascent!”

He knew he had only minutes, perhaps only seconds to get *Talmenka* moving, get her nose up from that tower mooring and gain elevation. He could not yet see them, but the shouting from the voice tubes was warning of the approach of two ships. Cruiser *Anapa* was coming in low over the airfield, its 76mm recoilless rifles already blazing at a ground target, where a group of OT-7 mobile 45mm guns had rattled up to the airfield and were providing support fire for the rifle companies on the scene.

The assault teams found that even though the initial defense was scattered and somewhat disorganized, it was still no small matter to simply brush a rifle battalion aside. It wasn’t until the airships had finished offloading the heavy weapons and initial supply canisters that they could retract their sub-cloud cars and begin to gain some elevation. Slowly, they began to appear over the north field like a herd of elephants, and their

recoilless rifles were going to make all the difference.

Anapa was soon joined by *Kalgar* and *Kazan*, and seeing them arriving, her Captain veered hard left and bored down on mooring Tower 1. The ship was soon in a gun battle with *Talmenka*, both taking and scoring hits at close range, with some rounds blasting the hard metal girders of the tower. It wasn't exactly Pearl Harbor, but *Talmenka* was not going to make it very far from that tower.

Chapter 23

At airfield Number 2 southwest of the city, the rifle companies off four more airships were on the ground, joined by the “Flag Battalion” units, which had made a daring close assault drop very near the airfield and Mooring Tower 4. This group had a strong ranger company, and all the mortar and machinegun teams to support the attack. They went in hard and quickly cleared the airfield buildings, but found that a light tank battalion with BT-7s had been posted here, with the tanks sitting right out on the airfield. No enemy airships were moored here, so the field offered the best prospects for an early capture.

Confident that he could get those tanks off the field, an enterprising Colonel Sumarov got to a radio set once they had occupied the airfield service buildings and notified higher-ups that he was sitting on that objective. What he meant to say was that his troops were landed safely and attacking the field. No matter what was actually said, the gist of the radio call got the Luftwaffe pilots running to their aircraft where the Air Landing Division was already waiting on the planes.

Just east of that location, a little drama that might have been a slice of the long Russian civil war was playing out. There, after hearing the fighting as they fed their horses morning fodder, three squadrons of Tartar cavalry suddenly realized there was a battle going on to the south near the airfield. They mounted up in twos and threes, and soon migrated south to see the hulk of a massive airship hovering near the airfield. Troops were already pushing towards their positions, and so they simply drew sabers and charged.

Unfortunately, the assault companies landing in this initial wave were armed to the teeth, heavy on submachine guns and with good supporting medium MGs. They went to ground, waited for the enemy to come thundering in on them, and then opened up with everything they had. Horses and riders were soon tumbling into the snow, the charge literally cut to pieces. One brave Tartar was thrown from his mount when the horse was shot right out from under him. A skillful rider, he adroitly landed on his feet, sabre held high, and continued the mad rush forward until a trooper gunned him down. The charge broken, the squadrons withdrew to the north, thinking to simply screen that area now from the nearby woods.

Near the airfield, there were more BT-7 light tanks than expected, but

the troops were able to engage them with 47mm AT guns that came off the last lift and were quickly into the action. Two hours later that airfield was cleared, the remnant of the light tank battalion withdrawing to the north. The signal was sent and the Luftwaffe was on its way.

At Kansk Airfield North, the situation was much different. While the ground action was successful, *Talmenka* was off its mooring and into a hot gun battle with those three enemy airships. In only minutes, however, the ship had at least half of its gas bags pierced by 76mm rounds, and when it was clear that it would not gain any further elevation, the Captain merely steered it for the airfield, where it came crashing down right onto the air strip in a flaming wreck. Nothing was going to land there for some time, and when Colonel Sumarov got the news on the radio, he cursed under his breath and gave the only orders possible.

“Alright,” he said to the Captain leading that assault. “Your attack there has failed. We don’t need Airfield 1. My men have done the job here. Pull out and clear Kansk east of the river. Set up blocking positions there, and be certain you control the main bridge. It will take time, but everything can land here at my field. You are now the west flank guard. Get moving!”

To hell with that, thought the Captain. He left men on the two bridges he already controlled north of Kansk, and with his supply caches at the assault LZ. To get to the main bridge he would have to move north, cross to the east side of the river, and then come in behind the assault battalion fighting on that side. It would be much simpler to just push down the west bank, and this is exactly what he did. The only thing in front of him was a squad of Military Police, so he and his men blasted Mooring Tower 1 to pieces, and then pushed on to do the same to tower’s two and three. When the last one went down he realized how useful it might have been for the extraction operation, but he had been told nothing of that, and assumed it was information known only to those above his pay grade.

Over the next few hours the Ju-52s were lined up one after another at Airfield South, landing, disgorging their men and supplies, then taxiing to the refueling station to take on fuel flown in by other planes. One windfall was the capture of all the aviation fuel there, which aided the refueling effort greatly. Once ready, the planes would take off again for the run back to Orenburg controlled territory west of the Ob River. There they would load on supplies for their second run in. Even with only one airfield serviceable this part of the plan, run by German pilots and ground crews, was coming off

with well timed precision.

As the battalions of the Orenburg Air Landing Division formed up, they were led quickly west. Between Kansk and Ilanskiy, the only resistance on the ground was that scattering of Tartar cavalry that had nearly captured Volkov himself in the last battle. This time they would prove only a thin barrier and slight delay to the hardened infantry coming off those planes.

At the same time, the presence of 16 airships in the region allowed all the heavy weapons to be moved quickly forward to designated zones where the infantry could find it. This allowed the ground troops to foot it lightly east, many on skis for rapid overland movement. Colonel Sumarov expected more resistance, yet he was glad his strength was building up on the ground quickly. Now all he had to do was get everything east to Ilanskiy, for his battle would either be won or lost there. Scout teams that dropped well east of that town reported nothing was approaching by rail, but he knew time was a factor.

By God, he thought. I'll take that damn railway inn if I have to level the entire town to get there. I still have no idea why Volkov wants this place. He brought the entire airship Corps here for this single operation, so it must be important. Maybe that's the real plan, to lure in all the remaining enemy airships and destroy them for good. In that case, why commit all these ground forces?

He shook his head, realizing that he was not the first soldier with crazy orders in hand and a desperate mission in front of him. Nor would he be the last. If that were the plan, then where was the enemy fleet? The intelligence briefing indicated at least two airships moored at Ilanskiy, though they had wisely stayed where they were.

But all that was about to change.

* * *

High in the sky, riding a cold tail wind out of the north, Vladimir Karpov stood on the bridge of *Tunguska*, his face set in the same look his brother always had before a battle. Though he had fought many at the academy in training, and participated in fleet exercises, this was to be his first. He had grilled Tyrenkov on fleet tactics with airships, mainly to learn how quickly the ship could gain or lose elevation, and how that was done. He also needed to know the number of guns on each ship, its fighting power and

speed, all factors that he was plugging into his mental computer.

They are like sailing ships at sea, he thought. They move slowly, rely on the wind at times, and they must get in very close to one another to utilize those short range recoilless rifles. The only difference is that they move in three dimensions instead of only two, like submarines without torpedoes, having to fire at one another with hull mounted guns instead. How very strange. While they have decent visibility, there is no sensor suite of any kind that is worth a damn—except my *Oko* panel. I can already see the exact positions of all the opposing airships, an advantage my enemy will not have here.

Then the game changer will be ranged attack. I need to give these air subs back their torpedoes, but the weapon's load I was sent from *Kirov* was sufficient only to arm this single ship—my ship.

Now he began to run down the inventory he had at hand, thinking how best to use it. He had a number of MANPADS, Man Portable Air Defense Systems, the Russian Ilga 9K38 “Needle” that the West called the SA-18. It was a light hand-held system, just 24 pounds and about 5 feet in overall length. The warhead was 2.6 pounds, with 14 ounces of explosives. The range was only 5200 meters, up to an altitude of 3500 meters, so this, too, was pretty much a close in defensive weapon, but one he would adapt to a fast attack missile. The replacement missile, the Verba, went into service in 2015, but none ended up in Troyak's larder. He did have other things of interest there, and they packed a good deal more punch.

The Kornet-EM anti-tank guided missile system was delivered. It could fire a seven pound automatic beam riding guided HEAT warhead that could blast through nearly 1300 mm of RHA equivalent armor, and range out 8000 meters. A second warhead used a thermobaric charge, and could range even farther, to 10000 meters. The extended range was developed to allow the missile to engage aerial targets, such as attack helicopters. Each system included eight ready to fire missiles.

There's my torpedo, he thought. A pity I only have eight of them. The tripod launcher weighed only 66 kilograms, perfect for mounting on the forward and top platforms of *Tunguska*. Karpov had learned that gaining elevation on the enemy was a preferred tactic, allowing him to fire down on the vulnerable mass of the airship with the gondola mounted recoilless rifles. He filed that away, smiling. This was going to be very interesting.

“What will you do sir?” asked Tyrenkov as his little fleet began to

gather over Ilanskiy. "It appears we've lost *Talmenka* at Kansk."

"Smash them," said Karpov. "What else? What is my current fleet status?"

"We join your two cruisers at Ilanskiy in five minutes, *Abakan* and *Angara*. With our division of four, that will give us six ships there, and *Novosibirsk* and *Irkutsk* are inbound with an estimated arrival time of 30 to 40 minutes."

"What about *Odessa* and *Omsk*?"

"A little farther out."

"They should be on my *Oko* panel by now. Have those crews inform me of their range and ETA."

"At once, Admiral." Tyrenkov moved to a nearby voice tube to the radar platform, wondering if this version of his commanding officer was as lethal and skilled as the elder brother. It was still so very strange to realize that there were two versions of the same man alive here in this world now. Something about that doubled his own problems when it came to thoughts of his own ambitions for power. There was something about them, even this one when he looked at you. It was as if he could see through walls, sense things about others around him, and read their disposition as friend or foe on a moment's brief interaction.

"Very well." Karpov looked to his Air Commandant, Bogrov. "Order the cruisers to 8,000 meters. Send the two battlecruisers right after them." He reached for their names, knowing he must not fail to remember little details like this. Thankfully Bogrov repeated back his order.

"Right sir, transmitting orders to *Riga* and *Narva* at once. Shall I make the ship ready to climb as well?"

"Not yet."

Bogrov hesitated for the barest moment, then simply said, "Aye sir," expecting the order to come later. "*Baikal* standing by with us, sir."

"Have her keep station behind us," said Karpov. "We'll hold at 3000 meters."

He's dividing the fleet, thought Tyrenkov as he watched. And he's leaving our two best ships too low. Should I say something? I must be very cautious in front of Bogrov and the rest of the bridge crew. Karpov must not be seen to lose face here. He must appear as though he were completely in control of the situation.

"Are you planning to fight from low elevation sir?" He asked cautiously.

“The enemy is,” said Karpov quietly. “It is over 20 kilometers from Kansk to Ilanskiy. In this snow, that should take forces landing at Kansk at least four hours to get here and form for attack. So they will utilize their Zeppelins to move men and equipment more efficiently.”

“We’ve received word that they have broken off the attack at Kansk North,” said Tyrenkov.

“Because a loyal Captain took his ship down there to block that landing strip,” said Karpov. “They took Kansk South, so they will be coming along the lower road south of the Trans Siberian Rail.”

“Most likely, sir.”

“And once they get here they will try to leapfrog our outer defense perimeter there with their airship mounted assault teams.” Karpov clasped his hands behind his back, as he often did when explaining a situation to a junior officer. “That is when I will hit them.”

“They will certainly have ships on overwatch for any such operation,” Tyrenkov suggested.

“And now you know why I have just sent four airships to 8000 meters.”

Tyrenkov drifted closer, leaning in so only Karpov could hear him now. “Sir... You will risk keeping our two best airships low? Might it not be better if the cruisers were given the ground interdiction assignment. They can regain elevation very quickly.”

“You are a fleet Admiral now, Mister Tyrenkov?”

“No sir, but I just thought—”

“I *am* a fleet Admiral, Mister Tyrenkov. This is a simple situation, and I cannot expect you to see what is necessary here. Simply maintain your liaison with the *Oko* panel team. I want to know the minute any significant grouping of enemy ships approach my position.”

A watchman did Tyrenkov’s job for him, leaping from the ladder up and bringing news. “Sir, radar reports six enemy airships inbound at 5000 meter elevation. Range 12,000 and closing.”

“We’ll need to drop emergency ballast now sir,” said Bogrov. “We’re at 3000 meters.”

“Steady as she goes,” said Karpov calmly. “Signalman, make ready to send code one.”

This was something Karpov had drilled that signal team with, a series of codes he wanted sent in the event of battle. Some were to be transmitted internally, to various weapons platforms on *Tunguska*’s outer shell, others

were signals meant for other fleet elements.

Tyrenkov seemed a little on edge. He did not appreciate the way Karpov had quietly told him off a moment ago, and now he was worried the next few minutes could see a situation developing that this man could simply not handle. Six enemy airships coming in at them with a 2000 meter elevation advantage was a highly dangerous situation.

“Order *Baikal* to vent emergency ballast and climb to 5000 meters at once. *Tunguska* will vent nose ballast number one only.”

“Sir,” Bogrov ventured. “That’ll get our nose up a bit but we won’t even be able to climb through 4000 meters before they get here, even with the engines full out. It’ll take a full emergency ballast dump now. We’re too heavy.”

“We’ll lighten our load in a minute,” said Karpov. Steady as she goes.”

Bogrov clenched his chin, glancing nervously at Tyrenkov. He could sense the other man’s discomfiture as well, but the Intelligence Chief said nothing.

Vladimir Karpov was about to go to war.

Chapter 24

The attack was bold and fast when it finally came in. Six airships came from above, having supported the landing of three companies of troops they moved up from the west. The bulk of the Air Landing Division then surged north across a thin frozen stream that meandered south of Ilanskiy, eventually finding its way to a series of deep set bogs with frozen, marshy banks. Those six airships then vented ballast, climbing rapidly to 5000 feet, and bore down on Karpov's position.

He had posted *Tunguska* and *Baikal* right off Tower Number 6, a little northeast of the inn, and right on the banks of the largest bog that flanked the town. Now the Captain of the Orenburg airship division, a man named Boris Gorelki, approached the scene in a seventh ship, the *Pavlodar*, one of the biggest remaining in the fleet at over 140,000 cubic meter lift capacity. He saw the two big airships at lower elevation far ahead, two cruisers higher up, with what looked like a pair of battlecruisers still struggling to reach 4000 meters to join them. He reasoned that all he had to do was keep his division at an altitude close to that, about 4000 meters, and his rifles should be able to pound those two big enemy ships from above, while taking little fire in return. So he ordered his cruisers to attack, hanging back to coordinate the battle from the rear.

He saw one of the massive ships, *Baikal*, make an emergency ballast drop, and he grinned, thinking his enemy had been caught by surprise. The other ship, *Tunguska*, was also drooling water from her nose, which he saw as a desperate attempt to get the ship pointed upwards for a rapid ascent.

"By God! We've got the bastards! Order the whole damn division in and pound them. We'll deal with those two battlecruisers after we're finished."

The engines of his cruisers revved up to full power, and they surged ahead, closing the range to about 7000 Meters. They needed to get in to at least 4000 meter range for the recoilless rifles to be effective, but before they could do so, Captain Gorelki saw the top platforms of the big ship up front open fire. That was sheer desperation, he thought, for nothing bigger than a 76mm gun was typically mounted on a top gun platform, and it couldn't reach his cruisers yet. He knew *Tunguska* carried longer range 105mm guns, but all of those would be dangling from the three gun gondolas under her belly, and well out of the action. He had about five seconds to gloat before he

saw something come streaking in at his lead ship. It was just a single round, he thought, and it wasn't likely to—

The sudden explosion cut that thought off at the root, for something blasted into the heart of his leading airship, the *Krasnodar*, and then exploded with a shuddering roar.

Karpov had lured those six airships in, deliberately lingering low to entice them to make this very maneuver. Then he shouted the code to his signalman, “Spearfish!” and the top platforms of *Tunguska* opened up with those modern day tank killing Koronet ATGMs, and they were all carrying 9M133F-3 thermobaric warheads, equivalent to 10 kilograms of TNT in explosive power. The resulting detonation was much more energetic and long lasting than a conventional warhead, as the round literally consumed all the oxygen in the air to fuel its fiery wrath. A single hit was going to wreak havoc on one of these airships.

Karpov's elder self had used his own self-styled thermobaric weapon to take down Big Red, and *Orenburg* with it. The fact that the missiles outranged the enemy recoilless rifles was carefully calculated. The helium filled gas in the big lifting bags was inert, and would not explode or burn, but helium was a very rare commodity, particularly in Orenburg. To compensate, the fleet had designed their airships in such a way that the centermost lifting bags would use hydrogen, and only those positioned near the outer shell of the ship contained the safer helium. So at the heart of most of these enemy ships was that Achilles heel, a highly explosive gas bag that could cause real trouble if detonated. That, and all the oxygen in the internal spaces allowing access for ladders and rigging, was the fuel that Karpov planned to ignite, along with all the oxygen canisters used at high elevation, and all the ammunition stored aboard those ships. He just needed the proper match, and the Koronet was the perfect choice.

Karpov's torpedoes struck each of those six airships, one after another, and in one thundering moment that would go down in this history as the ‘Rain of Fire,’ that entire airship division was doing a very good imitation of the *Hindenburg* disaster. The fires ignited ready ammo stores, engine fuel, bomb loads, high altitude oxygen canisters, and they burned everything living or dead with their all consuming fire. Within seconds, only the heavier duralumin skeleton of the ships could be seen, glowing red in places as they began to make their terrible plummeting descent. They were right above the line of troops they had just delivered, and now they came raining down upon

them, a thunderous storm of twisted metal, searing hot debris and flame.

Captain Gorelki stared in utter shock as he watched his cruisers ignite in that hot fire and fall, one after another. There went *Krasnodar*, and her sister ship *Kurgan*. Then the three S-Class cruisers fell to their fiery doom, *Stavropol*, *Samarkand* and *Saran*. *Astana* was the last to fall, another small A-Class cruiser. White with shock, he shouted to the helmsman to come about with all speed, his only thought now being escape. What in God's name had hit those ships?

Aboard *Tunguska* Bogrov gaped in utter amazement, watching one ship after another burn with that fierce yellow-white fire. He had seen Karpov immolate Big Red simply to get at the *Orenburg*, risking everything to try and take down the enemy flagship, and Volkov with it. But this was a terror the like of which he could never imagine. The fires seemed to be eating those ships alive, and he shuddered to imagine the fate of their crews, all dying in a holocaust that consumed the very oxygen in the air around them, asphyxiating any who might have avoided the searing fires.

There was a heartless evil to the attack, and he cast a wary glance at Karpov, seeing the other man standing there, with just the hint of a grin on his face. In one fell blow, the odds in the sky had shifted dramatically. There were now only another ten airships left in the *Orenburg* fleet, and when all the Siberian ships arrived, they would have eleven, with bigger and better ships, though none of that really mattered now.

Just as he fired that nuclear tipped MOS-III at the *Mississippi* battlegroup, Karpov had no qualms whatsoever in applying the most lethal weapon he had received from his elder brother, thermobaric fire. He realized he could have single handedly destroyed Volkov's entire fleet with *Tunguska* alone. There were four more enemy airships higher up, coming in from the west, but their dazed Captains had seen what just happened, and were staring in disbelief. Some thought the better of this rush into battle, and one already had his ship in a wide turn, looking for safer skies.

Karpov looked over at Tyrenkov, his eyes dark and unfeeling, yet carrying the hint of a taunt. "You were just instructing me on the necessity of elevation in an airship duel. What you have just witnessed might best be described as beating my enemy at his own game. Yes, he wanted to come in above me and put those rifles onto me, but I had a weapon that could trump anything on those ships, and out range their guns. What you have just seen is the result of a little backbone, a little deception, and three parts things you

would never understand. Remember Tyrenkov, I am a man who has seen days you could not imagine.” He turned to Bogrov now with another order. “Take the ship up to 5000 meters. No need to vent emergency ballast. As you can see, we are no longer in any immediate danger. Signal *Baikal* to follow.”

To Colonel Sumarov on the ground, the ‘Rain of Fire’ fell all around his forward positions. He had taken a great risk trying to leap frog those assault companies over the outer defensive line, but by God, what hell on earth could have destroyed all those airships like that? His attack had progressed swiftly, coming up on the road that would approach the center of Ilanskiy from the southeast. It was there that the airships fell, and now he looked to see the massive shapes of *Tunguska* and *Baikal* riding the smoke and char of his fleet’s demise, their gondola’s bright with fire as all those 105mm guns began to open up on his ground troops.

To make matters worse, the blocking teams east of the town had failed to prevent enemy reinforcements from arriving. A battalion of engineers from the Siberian 89th Sappers arrived by truck, and behind them came another battalion of tanks. Thankfully, he had seven 47mm AT guns positioned on that flank, but they had little infantry support.

He was on the radio, trying to determine what had happened to the two lead assault battalions. They had pushed very near the outskirts of the town, just a few kilometers south of the objective railway inn. But he could hear the boom of artillery, the pop of mortars firing, and a lot of machinegun fire. Three more battalions were on a line to the south, now engaged by troops the enemy had rushed to the scene, and equally matched. He was holding his own battalion down near the river as a reserve, and the division’s third regiment was farther west, coming up on the outer defense line from that direction.

From the sound of the frantic radio calls, and the awful wreckage on the ground, it now appeared that the navy was pulling out and consolidating its remaining airships to the west. The next hour would decide the battle, he knew, and things did not look good. He could throw his last reserve battalion in to try and regain the momentum of his ground assault, but something told him this whole operation was going to be a futile waste of good men, just like the last one.

I told them we needed the shock of the entire Air Landing Division in a swift, surprise attack, but it could not be done. Taking that airfield at Kansk took time, and getting here from there took even longer. Now the enemy is ready for us, with everything they had defending Ilanskiy, which is most

likely two full regiments, with reinforcements already beginning to come in on my flank. This is going to be another disaster, but if I pull out, and somehow manage to get my men back to that airfield, what then? I'm a dead man either way as I see things. If I pull out now, Volkov will put a bullet through my head if I manage to make it home. So I'm going to attack, and push with everything I have left.

He ordered his men up, personally leading the attack against that engineer battalion that had come in, and it was thick, close quarters fighting for the next half hour. The men fought bravely, but it was soon clear that would not be enough to get through. When Orenburg's airship Captains withdrew west, their presence at Kansk weighed heavily on that battle. All the bridges over the Kan river were blown, and it was found that the freeze was not deep enough to get over that barrier easily. Any Siberian troops arriving from the West would need to plan a cross river assault, or take and rebuild one of those bridges. The assault teams had also destroyed all the mooring towers, airship fuel and munitions depots, and they still controlled the southern airfield, where the last of the German JU-52s had just taken off on their final return leg to Orenburg. Hitler had given his pilots specific orders. They were to deliver those troops, make one additional supply drop, and then get those planes out of there.

Now the absence of enemy airships near Ilanskiy meant that the Siberians had total air superiority there. Karpov was personally selecting ground targets, using his 105mm guns and also dropping bombs on companies of enemy troops trying to group for attack. He sent *Abakan* and *Angara* further east to scout the approaches to the outer defense line there, and they soon reported no sign of enemy activity. So this was it, he thought. This is the main attack. If I stop them here, this whole operation fails, and then we can get over to Kansk at our leisure.

He gave orders that all the troops of the 40th Rifle Regiment holding the fortified line to the west of the town should pull out and move to support the 11th Guards, which had borne the brunt of the enemy attack from the south. Now he would match the enemy on the ground man for man, and he knew that they would need much more force than they seemed to have to really push through. Volkov wasn't going to get his railway inn that day, and he would also be lucky to save the rest of his airships. As the situation on the ground appeared favorable, he turned his thoughts to the remainder of the enemy fleet.

They thought to make this a little Pearl Harbor, he mused. Well, I have quickly made it into a battle more like Midway. The loss of those six airships had to sting, and now they will think twice every time they approach one of my ships, never knowing if that fiery death will strike them. Fear was now a new weapon in his quiver, and he knew exactly how to use it.

“Give me an update from my *Oko* panel team,” he ordered. Tyrenkov was quick to fetch the information, telling him that all ten contacts remained to the west, five over the main road and rail lines into Kansk, and five more hovering around that airfield. He decided to move west, ordering all his available airships to move to 5000 meters and form one group. He had *Tunguska*, *Baikal*, *Narva* and *Riga* close in hand, with *Abakan* and *Angara* about ten kilometers to the west. His other ships, *Irkutsk* and *Novosibirsk*, would be on the scene soon, though he was informed that the southern division would be another two hours, fighting a stiff headwind as they came north.

“We attack with the six ships we have,” he said calmly. “Our initial objective will be that concentration of ships near the airfield. Once we establish air superiority there, we have cut their jugular. This attack will fail.”

Tyrenkov looked at him with newfound respect now, and an equal measure of caution. He was, indeed, every bit as formidable and dangerous as his counterpart, and not an unknowing clone that he would have to shepherd and nursemaid along. He seemed to grasp the tactics required here instinctively, but was it this man who made the difference here, or those terrible weapons he employed?

Something told him the two came part and parcel. That is why the elder Karpov was so set on gaining control of that ship. These are men from another time, and their weapons are as terrible as that future they came from. With them, they are invincible in a situation like this, but those weapons are not a limitless resource. Every time they are used, these men grow that much weaker. Oh, they may be skilled warriors, clever, devious, but I have all those talents as well. So as this war progresses, and they ply their war craft here, they will grow weaker....

Karpov would lead his six airships west, but the moment they were spotted, all the ships hovering over the airfield revved up their engines and began to run. Karpov considered firing off his last two Koronet missiles at them as they fled, but decided he would be better served to hold those valuable munitions in hand for some future emergency.

As for Ivan Volkov, when he received the news of this third disaster at Ilanskiy, he sat in complete silence. There was no upwelling of rage, though he made a mental note to personally shoot the Captains of each airship that returned. As for the troops he had sent, they were all as good as dead as far as he was concerned, grist in the mill. Later that night, he sent for a serving woman in his sleeping chambers, and when he had finished, he put his hands around her neck and choked her to death, quietly cursing Karpov and the Siberians as he did so.

The Germans were in Moscow, but he could not take one stinking hamlet with the full might of his entire airship fleet, and that with another full division landed by those German planes. His operation had failed, and now he would have to go to Hitler with something from his archives to tell him it had actually succeeded, some little blueprint or weapon diagram that Germany might be able to build in the 1940s. He would say it had been retrieved from the secret enemy design site at Kansk, which he destroyed.

There was one other thing that did not fail to escape his notice as all the reports came in. A name was on the airwaves in the battle chatter, the name of the man he had grown to both fear and despise these last months—Karpov. It was clear from those reports that he was on the scene, for the Siberian flagship, *Tunguska*, was also spotted in action over Ilanskiy. Yet all his intelligence network had indicated Karpov was on his ship again, and that ship was in the Pacific. Could he have made a rendezvous with *Tunguska*, and then raced home to his precious railway inn to foil this attack? How could he have known I was planning this? How could he have appeared here so quickly when he was supposedly thousands of miles away at sea? Something was very strange in all of this, and he resolved to find out exactly what it was.

Part IX

Audacity

“The first quality that is needed is audacity.”

—Winston Churchill

Chapter 25

Admiral Raeder knew all along that they had wasted a supreme opportunity after the successful conclusion of Operation Felix. At that moment, well before the onset of Operation Barbarossa, they should have allocated any forces necessary to ensure the occupation of the Cape Verde and Canary Islands. With the Mediterranean closed, those vital outposts stood right astride Britain's last lifeline to Egypt. Now he met with Luftwaffe Chief Hermann Goering for the final planning to redress that oversight, and the two men seldom saw eye to eye.

"It was your doing, Admiral," huffed Goering, his corpulent presence seeming offensive to Raeder, his attitude always overbearing and self-serving. "I cannot be expected to seize islands with my elite Falschirmjaegers if you cannot guarantee me naval support. These fiascos in the Atlantic were the end of those plans. Had your forces shown more skill and backbone, they might already be sitting at anchor in the Grand Harbor."

"Yes, yes," said Raeder. "So we have both made promises we could not keep—or have you forgotten that you told the Führer you would assure him air superiority over England? So do not disparage the Navy. My ships have fought well. This new enemy weaponry has been most difficult, and I believe there are a few missing *Stuka* pilots that would attest to that fact. These rockets were a technology we failed to fully appreciate."

"We are working on that," said Goering. "there are already test models for a new anti-ship guided bomb, which is something you will be very pleased to hear. We are calling it Fritz at the moment, Project X, and it is controlled by radio signals. We can guide it directly to the target from our naval attack bombers. You will see. This is only the beginning. The British may have stolen a march on us, but we will catch up quickly enough."

"It wasn't the British, Herr Goering. It was the Russians."

"I have heard that same story," said Goering. "Do you seriously believe it? The Russians? What would they know about missile technology?"

"Enough to sink my aircraft carrier," said Raeder dejectedly. "Which reminds me—we will need more modified *Stukas* with arrestor hooks installed to meet the new carrier building program."

"Building program? I thought *Peter Strasser* was the only other ship authorized to proceed."

“True,” said Raeder. “The only other ship above 15,000 tons. I still have authorization to continue with our destroyer program, but as for the aircraft carriers, I should have said conversion program. There were several good hulls left from Plan Z, and it would be a waste to simply scrap them. It took me some time, but I managed to persuade Hitler as to the necessity of having fleet air support at sea. And your *Stukas* and Messerschmitts can be thanked for that. I will need more of the latter as well, the 109Ts.”

“Do not worry, Admiral. If you can build your ships, I can deliver those planes and pilots. I am told we have a budding new Ace in your service.”

“Two of them,” said Raeder. “They are both on the *Goeben* now, Marco Ritter and Hans Rudel. The first one kills enemy planes, the latter their ships.”

“Rudel?” said Goering, “Yes, he came out of the aviation training school at Crailsheim. This is the man who’s been sending British ships home for repairs? Good for him, but better to sink them. We will give him better bombs soon, you will see.”

“Very well,” said Raeder. “To the matter at hand—Operation Condor. We were not able to conclude this matter in 1940, so now we are faced with an even bigger problem. For the time being, any operation against the Cape Verde Islands is out of the question, but Halder will be here shortly, and we will discuss the details of the Condor plan for our Canary Islands assault. I trust you have retrieved the aircraft you put at the service of Ivan Volkov?”

“All but six planes,” said Goering. “Three had engine problems, and the others were damaged on landing in Siberia. That was a most unfortunate operation, and the Führer was very wise to prohibit the use of my Falschirmjaegers. Lending Volkov the planes was bad enough, but thankfully, we have them back. The service schedule will see them ready for this plan of yours.”

“Good,” said Halder, stepping through the far door to the conference table. He carried a brief which undoubtedly had plans and maps all drawn up by the Army, and now it was time for the heads of all three arms to coordinate their efforts.

After the stunning success of Operation Felix, the British had responded to the seizure of their precious Rock of Gibraltar by quickly dusting off their own long established plans for Operation Puma, the occupation of the Canary Islands. The scales of balance always had those islands on one side as opposed to Gibraltar, for as early as June of 1940, the government had

summed up the situation very clearly when the issue first arose in Churchill's mind. They knew that taking those islands would give Spain every pretext to strike at Gibraltar, but the plans were still well laid.

"It may be said that our action in operation PUMA will precipitate an attack on Gibraltar, which will make it untenable for our fleet. But for the Battle of the Atlantic the possession of the Islands is infinitely more important than our ability to keep ships at Gibraltar, and in my opinion, the temporary abandonment of the harbor can be faced and accepted... particularly since we make so little use of passage through the Mediterranean from west to east."

That route was now firmly closed, for after the bold sortie by *Kirov*, *Argos Fire* and *HMS Invincible*, the Axis forces had taken additional measures to seal off the Straits of Gibraltar. German *Stukas* were now on ready alert at airfields in Gibraltar, Tangiers. and Morocco. Mines had been laid, new shore batteries installed, and stealthy U-boats lurked in the only passage that could be used by another submarine. The convoy routes to Egypt had been forced to take the long route around the Cape of Good Hope for some time now, and that would not change soon. Yet to protect that last vital link to Cunningham and Wavell, the Canary Islands had been a prize well worth taking. Sitting right astride those convoy lanes, its occupation by the enemy would have a disastrous affect on the British war effort, and so the plan to seize the Canaries was launched as soon as Britain could collect the troops and shipping required.

There were no longer any diplomatic problems concerning Spain to complicate the issue. While still openly declaring themselves neutral, the Spanish had nonetheless openly consorted with Nazi Germany, causing Churchill to wag his finger in parliament and exclaim: "The continent where the blood of our sons has already been shed in the defense of freedom, will one day come to rue the hour when they turned their back on the light and walked instead in the shadow of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler. And we will not forget, for the Tide of Fortune ebbs and flows, and one day our forces will return to those embattled shores, embracing any who called themselves our friend in the darkest hours of this war, and smiting with our righteous anger all who stood opposed."

Renamed Operation Pilgrim, the British operation was reorganized with a much stronger attacking force. Where Puma had thought to rely on stealth and surprise in a quick raid, Pilgrim brought a hammer to make the outcome

a near certainty, no matter how prepared the enemy might be. So it was that a combined army/navy force was cobbled together for action against the Grand Canary Island. General H.R. Alexander commanded the Army, and Rear Admiral L.K.H. Hamilton the naval forces group. This island had the best harbor and aerodrome in the entire group, and plans were set to seize the harbor at La Luz, and the airfields at Gando on the eastern coast.

Submarines were positioned off each objective prior to the raid, to make a reconnaissance and also serve as a navigation beacon on the night of the attack. The Royal Navy was ready with shore bombardment groups for Gando, as well as Los Rodeos airfield on the Island of Tenerife. A cruiser was assigned to neutralize the Spanish shore battery at Arinaga. After this, destroyers raced in to take up close support positions, and Number 9 Commando was ready for the leading assault. 29th Infantry Brigade was tasked to come ashore at Gando Bay, debarking over three color coded beaches, and 1st Guards Brigade at Arinaga. A third Brigade, the 36th Infantry, was held in floating reserve, and three aircraft carriers operating about 50 miles southeast of the island provided reconnaissance and ground support, with Hurricanes up for air superiority. Twelve Blenheims were on notice to be ready to fly to the captured airfield at Gando as soon as it was safely cleared.

Auxiliary assaults were made by Special Services Brigade. The Number 9 Commando operated from RMS *Queen Emma*, with 12 Commando aboard the faster destroyers, 2 Commando on the *Ulster Monarch*, 1 & 3 Commando on the *Royal Ulsterman*, and 4 Commando on the *Royal Scotsman*. A full rehearsal of the operation was conducted in the Orkney Islands in August of 1940, and come September the plan was launched, a full year before it would ever see ink on a page in Fedorov's history books.

The islands were taken with very little resistance from Spanish forces, wergild for the loss of Gibraltar, and the light footed British Commandos then used the Grand Canary Island of Las Palmas as an easy springboard to seize the entire island group. They now had troops scattered over all seven key islands, and a year had been spent in developing harbor and airfield facilities to support Royal Navy operations guarding the vital convoy lanes. The Cape Verde Islands were taken in a similar operation four months later. The loss of Gibraltar had shifted the center of gravity for fleet operations to these islands, and now the Germans intended to finally do something about the situation.

“We are a year late,” Raeder complained again as he tapped the map with his pencil at the OKW briefing room. “As I was just telling the Vice-Chancellor and Reichsminister here, we should have taken these islands as planned, right after the successful conclusion of Operation Felix, but the three divisions promised me for the operation never materialized.”

“Oh, but they did, Admiral,” said Halder. “The problem was that they were used elsewhere. Rommel took Goering’s troops and the Grossdeutschland Regiment on loan for a while, and Kubler’s Mountain Division went to Syria along with the 22nd Luftland.”

“We shall need them back again,” said Raeder. “The Führer has wasted enough resources in this foolish attack on Moscow.”

“I would not breathe a word of that around Herr Hitler,” Goering admonished. “That is if you want to keep the rest of your surface navy. And many will now say that this new operation is equally fruitless. What good ever came of this Plan Orient you were so keen on? Rommel is still sitting in Libya, and though we managed to achieve a stalemate in Syria, thanks again to the timely arrival of my Fallschirmjagers, the British took all of Iraq in compensation. As for that little plan to seize the oil fields at Baba Gurgur, whatever came of it? So now you want to stage another magic trick, but first Herr Halder here must pull three rabbits out of his hat? Three divisions?”

Halder raised an eyebrow. “I can give you only two, and I am even lucky to have those in hand. The 22nd Luftland has been relieved in Syria, and moved through Italy to France. From there they will go by sea to Gibraltar.”

“By sea?” Raeder gave him a wary look.

“The French have arranged transport and security,” said Halder. “The second division will be a mixed force. Goering will give you one regiment of 7th Flieger Division. The rest is in Syria. To that I can add the 98th Mountain Regiment taken from Rommel, and embarked at Benghazi for transport to Gibraltar. Those forces will constitute your shock elements for the attack. Once secured, the French have promised us additional brigades in support.”

“But we will need at least one more infantry division to garrison the islands after they are taken,” said Raeder.

“I will need time for that,” said Halder. “Every Panzergruppe commander in Russia has been hounding me for infantry divisions to cover their flanks all summer. Now that the winter has frozen the oil in the tanks, they still want infantry to relieve their panzer divisions. Now you come to me

again with the same tattered check, and how am I supposed to cash it?

“War is an expensive operation,” said Raeder. “Considering the fact that we could have had those islands for pocket change last year after Felix, two or three divisions should not be that difficult to find. Unfortunately, the British have a substantial presence there now. They have a battleship on permanent duty at the Grand Harbor, and our intelligence reports 18 destroyers, three cruisers and the occasional aircraft carrier all operating from the Canaries.”

“That will be the concern of the Grand Admiral,” said Halder. “My only concern was the long end of this stick. I was asked to provide the forces necessary for the assault, and that I have done. Admittedly, Herr Rommel was not pleased to learn he will be another regiment light on infantry, but in compensation, he will get the next battalion of our newest tanks, for all the good it will do him.”

“And the short end of that stick?” Raeder smiled.

“In your capable hands, Admiral. Goering here has promised that he can deliver the Flieger Regiment to any target we name, which must be an airfield, of course. Then he will use his transports to fly in the 22nd Luftland Division. I trust you will do a little better job of that than Ivan Volkov?” Halder looked at Goering, and the Reichsminister of Aviation smiled. “As for the 98th Mountain Regiment, it will have to either come by sea to arrive at the time of the assault, or stand by at Casablanca after an overland movement from Tangiers.”

“Air transport will be the safest option,” said Raeder. “Assuming Goering has fighters to see to the protection of Auntie JU. Because the British will have land based fighters on all the main airfields, and Blenheim bombers—not to mention that aircraft carrier.”

“It is 380 to 400 miles to Agadir on the coast of Morocco,” said Goering, “and another 80 miles to Safi. Even with drop tanks, the range of my Me-109s is only 528 miles, so if they fly from any of those fields, they will have to land on the islands, and there will be very little time to loiter over the battle zone.”

“We have found you other airfields,” said Halder as he unrolled a map of the region. “There is a small landing strip here at El Aaiun, another here at Tarfaya, with a small port near Cape Juby. The third is here at Tan-Tan, and then we have fields at Goulmine, Sidi Ifini, and Tiznit just south of Agadair. The main effort will come from those last few fields, but the smaller ones to

the south will prove useful. If you operate fighters from there, they can loiter a good long while. I will see that the necessary fuel is delivered by truck to sustain the planned operation.”

“And I can contribute here as well,” said Raeder. “The Führer may have canceled the last of my heavy battleships, and he is putting the steel to good use in those new tanks you boast of so often. But I managed to pull a few fish off the cutting board before the axe fell. The French carrier we captured in 1940 is now ready for operations, the *Joffre*. In fact, it is ready for *this* operation, for I can think of no better way to use it than to provide the additional air support we need here.”

“I have not heard of this,” said Halder. “Another aircraft carrier? Wasn’t the fate of *Graf Zeppelin* enough to persuade you as to the limited utility of such vessels?”

“That was most unfortunate,” said Raeder, “and hopefully, it will not happen again. The ship responsible for that attack is no longer in the Atlantic. It has taken the polar sea route north of Siberia to go plague the Japanese in the Pacific.”

“And while the cat’s away...” Halder smiled.

“Precisely.” The Admiral reached into his attaché and produced a line drawing.

Chapter 26

“We have christened this new ship *Prinz Heinrich*, 20,000 tons, and capable of transporting 40 aircraft. And we have been three months training the pilots and coaxing new Me-109Ts off the assembly lines—all under the careful eye of the Reichsminister here.” He gave Goering a glance, seeing the man nod in his direction.

“Those aircraft, along with another dozen off the *Goeben*, will have to do the job until the land based aircraft reach the scene. I would suggest Heinkels instead of Messerschmitts at those northern fields, Herr Goering. They have over 1,400 British miles in range. Between the fighters you move to the southern fields, and those on my carriers, we should achieve air superiority, am I correct?”

“I can guarantee that,” said Goering, and Raeder said nothing more about the same promise he had made to Hitler concerning England.

“And what about the Royal Navy?” asked Halder.

“*Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* are already at Casablanca, and fit for operations. The French have moved the *Normandie* and *Richelieu* to form another *Schweregruppe*. I think we have more than enough with those ships to deal with the Royal Navy.”

“We have not had much success in that lately,” said Halder with the edge of a warning in his voice.

“True,” said Raeder, “but third time is a charm. Unlike the Italians, the French Navy has shown good fighting spirit, and they have excellent ships. Yes, the British have seen our buildup at Casablanca, though we have been moving the transports required for the operation into that port at night in small convoys. Again, we have the French to thank for those ships, and they have dealt us a very nice hand. One ship, in particular, is our Ace in the hole—the *Bretagne*.”

Halder looked surprised. “And old French battleship?”

“No, Herr General, it is a new French ocean liner, built just before the war. Perhaps you knew it by its original name, the *Normandie*. When the French built that marvelous battleship the designers took that name, even though the liner had already made it famous by capturing the trans-Atlantic speed record. Then, after the war, they realized having two ships at sea by the same name could be confusing, and so, when their old battleship *Bretagne*

was sunk by the British, they renamed the ocean liner in compensation for the theft of her identity. It was in New York Harbor at the outbreak of the war, but slipped out just before the Americans got the chance to intercept that ship. The French moved it to Toulon, and now it will serve nicely to transport those Mountain troops you have scraped together for this operation. With a ship like that, over 80,000 tons and fast at 30 knots, I can get those troops to the islands in no time at all. And the best news is that she will have company. The Italians have agreed to lease us the *SS Rex*, another fine steamship liner. Between the two of them I can transport 4500 troops, and that is with every man in plush accommodations! We can triple that number easily, and move that entire third division if you can find one for me. This operation looks sound.”

“Interesting,” said Halder. “But there is one more thing to consider. Assuming we take these islands, you realize you will be also taking on a permanent duty to keep the troops there supplied.”

“That is the end of my short stick,” said Raeder. “We will need to move fuel, oil, munitions, supplies, and mostly by sea. The Luftwaffe transports can help as well, and it will be a difficult operation. Yet consider the payoff, Halder. Those islands sit right astride the British convoy routes to Freetown and Cape Town. That is the lifeline to the British 8th Army in Egypt and Libya.”

“That is the only thing that quieted Rommel when I asked him for that Mountain Regiment.”

“Correct. Rommel has finally grasped the essence of his situation in North Africa. No more gallivanting across the desert. He finally understands logistics are the only thing that matter in that theater. So from the Canary Islands, we strangle the British supply line, and also gain a wonderful base for Dönitz and his U-boats. He has been complaining that the nice big hole in the Atlantic where his U-boats could always hide and rendezvous with tankers was filled by the British occupation of those islands. Now he is firmly in my camp on this plan. I argued all of this last year, and the Führer has finally come to his senses. Now we have the navy in a perfect position at Casablanca, and if you and Goering deliver the planes and troops as promised, this could be a decisive victory. From there, we can plan to rout them out of Dakar, which will make the French happy, and then use that as a base to attack the Cape Verde Islands.”

“Grand plans,” said Halder. “Yet you realize what this attack will mean?

Late last year the British wisely acted to seize those islands, and now there are well established airfields on Tenerife, and many other islands as well. Your initial plan eventually targets the Grand Canary Island, but we will have to take them all. Not one of those airfields can be left in British hands, otherwise your plan to supply our troops there would be in constant jeopardy. In my opinion, this is a very risky operation, and precisely for the same lesson you think Rommel has learned—logistics. Are you sure you have passed the test, Admiral?”

“I will not say I was without qualms myself,” Raeder admitted. “Kubler will be given overall command of the Army and Luftwaffe forces used, and he has assured me that he will deliver the islands as planned. The question you raise is my concern. Yes, logistics. We are working on a plan to mount overland truck convoys to the Moroccan coast, and the new Siebel ferries are big enough to make the crossing, if we can get them there.”

“That will do for short term supply,” said Halder, “but it will not be sufficient in the long run.”

“Correct.” Raeder did not disagree. “For that we will need regular cargo transport, but there are only two suitable harbors south of Gibraltar and Tangiers. One is the main naval base at Casablanca, but it is well over 500 sea miles from the islands. The second is at Lasfar, also 450 nautical miles. So we are looking at development of a new facility at Agadir. There is a good road to that place from Marrakesh, which will become our forward supply center in southern Morocco. Agadir is only 220 nautical miles to the nearest island, and from there we can hop supplies with the Siebel ferries to all the rest.”

“And the ships?”

“Here is the list.” Raeder handed Halder a short report. “These are all French ships, the *General Bonaparte*, a small 2800 ton passenger ship can serve as an ammunition ferry, about 1000 tons carrying capacity.”

“Good to see the old General is still useful,” said Halder with a wry smile.

“Then we have the steamboat *Sainte Julienne*, about 3500 tons, but it can carry a good number of troops or 1500 tons of cargo.”

“A drop in the bucket.” Halder shook his head.

“Next is *Sainte Jacqueline*, a slow transport at 8.5 knots with about 3000 ton cargo capacity, and *Sainte Edmond* can carry another 1500 tons.”

Halder was still not impressed. “So between the General and his three

saints, you have only about 7000 tons of cargo lift. If you want those three divisions, then those ships can keep them supplied for only a week to ten days.”

“SS *Patria* will do a little better,” said Raeder pointing to his list. “It escaped from Haifa just before the war and made it back to Nice. That ship is nearly 12,000 tons GRT, with underdeck capacity for up to 9000 tons of cargo at 15 knots. It will be our main supply transport.”

“Assuming you can load it at this new facility you speak of.”

“It can run out of Casablanca or Lasfar. The smaller ships will use the new port at Agadir. With this little merchant fleet I can run a convoy every two weeks and keep all our troops well supplied. And rest assured, I can protect those merchant ships at sea, and we’ll also have good air cover over the islands.”

Raeder inclined his head, finally convinced. “Alright, Admiral, I can approve this plan. At the moment, I would give my right arm for one or two more infantry divisions in Russia, but I will find something for your garrison force as soon as I possibly can. You realize that the British won’t like your little foray.”

“Not at all,” said Raeder. “That is the general idea.”

“Yes? Well Kubler’s boys may kick them out, just as he did the job at Gibraltar, but rest assured, the British will be back for a rematch. And when they do come, they will have the Americans with them, another big navy for you to worry about. So the Führer can have his bird in hand when we take those islands, assuming this plan succeeds, but I have a bad feeling that we will just get settled in before we lose them again.”

Goring gave him a sidelong glance. “Might we say the same about Moscow?”

The silence in the room was fairly thick after that.

Raeder took up his maps and papers, putting them slowly into his attaché. “Herr General,” he said quietly. “I will promise not to tell the Führer you said that about this operation, if you will do the same concerning my earlier remarks about the futility of our fiasco in Russia.”

“Agreed.” Halder nodded, ending their meeting. But neither man would forget his last remark, because the British and their American friends would not disappoint them, or fail to make Halder’s grim prediction the dangerous threat it would soon become.

* * *

The U-Boats were already on the prowl, the first element of the German plan to be set in motion. A Wolfpack of six boats was out from Casablanca, and silently making its way south in the oily dark night of January 17th, 1942. Designated *Seeräbaur*, or Sea Robber, they were out shadowing Convoy HG 76, homeward bound after delivering supplies to British bases in the Azores. It had been sighted by a Fw 200 Condor patrolling from Bordeaux. One of the Sea Robbers, U-108, was the first to spot it, 32 ships escorted by seven corvettes and a pair of old sloops.

That night, every U-Boat in the Wolfpack closed in, including U-131, until four had made contact. They lurked in the still waters, waiting for the other boats to report in. *Korvettenkapitän* Arend Baumann was out in front. The boat was cruising on the surface just after dawn, when the watchman suddenly called out a warning—*aircraft at three o'clock!*

The signal to dive was given soon after, but U-131 would not be quick enough that day. An eagle eyed pilot off Britain's first light escort carrier would spot the boat, and come in to make a strafing run just as Baumann submerged. The alarm was up, and a most unusual man, on a most unusual ship would help end the first and only wartime patrol of U-131, and mark a sea change in the battle for the Atlantic, which until that moment, had been a decided failure for the Allies.

The ship in question was one HMS *Audacity*, a ship that the Germans could rightfully say they had tried to sink twice. In fact, it was once a ship that served in their very own merchant marine, the SS *Hanover*, a 5500 ton cargo liner on the 'banana run' between Bremen and the West Indies. When caught off Puerto Rico by the light cruiser *Dunedin* and a Canadian destroyer, her Kapitan gave the first order to sink the ship, but an enterprising Lieutenant Hughes off the *Dunedin*, secured the ship quickly with a boarding party, closing the sea cocks just in time to prevent the scuttling attempt. The fires deliberately set by the Germans were another matter, but the British were able to tow the ship to Jamaica, where they soon renamed their prize *Sinbad*.

The genie rising from that bottle would have a curious history, for *Sinbad*, being over 440 feet long, was selected as a candidate for conversion to a light escort carrier. Even though British occupation of the Azores and Madeira had helped to close segments of the Mid-Atlantic gap, there were

still places where aircraft off those islands could not reach. The U-boats could gather there in places the merchant marine would call 'black pits,' plying their deadly craft of undersea warfare. It was decided that light carriers would be a good stopgap measure, and *Sinbad* was moved to the dry docks in Blythe for conversion. When they first began to disassemble her small superstructure, people unaware of the plan would shake their heads and call it a waste of a perfectly sound ship.

A little over a year after her capture, the ship was renamed yet again, and HMS *Audacity* was commissioned into His Majesty's Service, Britain's first escort carrier. The ship had a perfectly flat flight deck, with no island and nothing more than a single mast which mounted her Type 79B radar set. She was rigged out with four 102mm guns, a six pounder, four 2 pounder AA guns and another four 20mm cannons, but her real mission was to carry number 802 Squadron, with eight Martlet fighters out into that Atlantic Gap. There the fighters would be tasked with hunting down the long range German Condor reconnaissance bombers, and conducting routine anti U-Boat patrols. The ship would also escort convoys when necessary, and she claimed her first kill when a Martlet found and shot down a Condor attempting to bomb the rescue ship *Walmer Castle*.

The man aboard who got that plane had quite a name for himself, one Eric Melrose "Winkle" Brown, a young 22 year old test pilot who had set a record for flying 487 different types of aircraft, and would go on to make an astounding 2407 safe carrier landings, more than any other man in history. One of those landings would be accomplished in a Sea Vampire, making the first jet aircraft landing and takeoff from a British carrier. A natural in the skies, Winkle Brown had gone up for the first time on his father's knee in a Gloster Gauntlet, when he was only eight years old.

Strangely, Brown would meet a famous German WWI flying Ace in 1936 at the Berlin Olympics, and the two men struck up a friendship. Ernst Udet was the second highest scoring German Ace of that war, and his studied eye saw a fighter pilot in the man named Winkle. He took Brown up in his plane, showed him the ropes, and when they had made a flip flopping landing that Brown thought would be his last, the German pilot just laughed, as he had deliberately maneuvered the plane to show Brown what could be done. Brown asked if he could fly with him again.

"Do two things for me first," he said to Brown in halting English. "First learn to speak German, and then become a fighter pilot." Brown did both, and

so it was that this German speaking protégé of a German Ace, on an ex-German ship that her Kapitän had failed to scuttle, now found himself in the middle of the Atlantic, with orders to bite the hand that fed him. While his old mentor went on to work for Hermann Göring, and was instrumental in building the new German Luftwaffe, it was now Lieutenant Brown's job to shoot those planes down.

Udet had always been a bawdy, cigar smoking, hard drinking, finagling man, in love with life and everything in it. But those years under Göring saw a shadow fall upon him, and he would later feel betrayed by the Reichsminister, blamed for any shortcoming in Luftwaffe production, and driven to kill himself in a moment of despair on the 17th of November, 1941. His suicide note claimed his death could be attributed to "Iron One," the name he gave to Göring, but that story was covered up, and Udet was given a hero's funeral. Strangely, a new German Ace, Werner Mölders, was killed in a plane crash while en-route to attend that funeral.

Mölders was the first pilot in history to claim 100 kills, also credited with developing many new fighter tactics like the Finger-Four formation and Crossover Turn. History had a strange way of connecting dots, and 'Pappy' Mölders was laid to rest that day, right beside Ernst Udet, literally following the WWI hero to the grave. They had good company, for the famous Manfred von Richthofen was right there beside them, and the honor guard for Mölders' burial consisted of seven more top German Aces.

When Winkle Brown heard the news, he was sad for the loss of his old mentor, but no less determined to be a part of the undoing of his Luftwaffe now that war had come again. The Germans had not learned their lesson the first time around, and he was ready to teach it all to them again.

Chapter 27

Brown would get more than one chance to shine in the days ahead. *Audacity* was soon assigned to maritime patrol out of Horta Harbor, in the Azores on the Island of Faial. The channel between that small port, and Madalena on Pico Island to the west, was just 7 kilometers wide, and the British had made the entire channel into an anchorage for Force H. The accommodations were not as fitting as their former residence at Gibraltar, but the Azores, offering good airfields and decent anchorages, was now a vital watering hole on the long Atlantic convoy route to Cape Town and beyond. *Audacity* was tasked with ASW patrol and convoy escort duties, but on this occasion, the converted German freighter would soon be put to the test against her big brothers in the Kriegsmarine.

Something was in the wind that night, a cold winter wind, and young Eric Melrose “Winkle” Brown had a nose for it. He had been watching the service crews huddling in the darkness after sunset, moving like wraiths among a herd of pterodactyls. The planes looked like that, clustered together on the aft quarter of the short flight deck, wings folded, their silence and stillness belying the violence inherent in their design. Sometimes they might work all night, tuning up engines, checking fluid and fuel levels, mounting ammo, and even test firing a troublesome machinegun. He and his mates relied on them every day for their lives, taking it on faith that the plane they climbed into the next morning was mechanically and structurally sound.

That had not been the case for Brown when he was selected to demonstrate the new Martlets along with a few other pilots. His plane suffered an engine stopping failure right in the middle of a rolling maneuver, and he went bang away down into the water. Thankfully, the plane had built in flotation bags, which deployed to save Brown and his air steed that day. He was very gratified to know his plane could float if he ever had to ditch, something he filed away in the inner drawer marked ‘Self Confidence.’

The feeling in the air tonight was one of renewed urgency. Weeks ago, they had been briefed on the outcome of the Japanese attack in the Pacific, crowding round the radio set to hear the broadcast speech by Roosevelt when he labeled that dark moment a “day that will live in infamy.”

“The Yanks are in it now for sure,” said Winkle to his mate, Lieutenant Peter “Sheepy” Lamb, a bright new officer of just 18 years of age.

“Glad for that,” said Lamb. “We’ve held the bloody watch out here for two long years. It’s about time somebody else reached for a bottle in this bar fight.” He had been itching to fly ever since he found himself in the rubble of London during the Blitz, staring up at the vapor trailed of the Luftwaffe bombers as they came in.

“Somebody ought to get up there after that lot!” he had said to a constable, and days later he had realized that somebody was him. He would one day complete over 650 carrier deck landings, and set the record for both speed and elevation in a test jet aircraft called the SR53. Today, however, his lot was the Martlet, an American made fighter from Grumman.

By his own admission, Brown had been one of the “suicidal types” that went for fighters after being recruited into the Royal Navy. The steady hands looked for the bombers, but he was all dash and jab. Once in his first Gloster Gauntlet, an old bi-plane, he still lorded it over the chaps in the Tiger Moths. He had flown the Skua, then the ‘old Gloster Gladiators and bumbling Rocs,’ as he call them. Finally they got a slightly better plane, the Fairey Fulmar. In his mind, this new American plane was better than all the rest.

“This here is the sinews of war,” he said to his mate. “If they’ve got more of these, I’ll be happy to see them. That’s a tough, fiery little airplane. A real angry bee, that one.”

The new American plane was a variant of the F4F Wildcat, renamed the Martlet by the British. He had given it a thorough test, and would write of that experience: “The Wildcat was a great asset to the Fleet Air Arm, bringing it to nearly the level of the fighter opposition. It was also an aircraft specifically designed for modern carrier operations, thereby setting new standards for British designers in the field. The Wildcat was a potent fighter, with splendid maneuverability, good performance, heavy firepower, and excellent range and endurance. On top of this, it was a superb deck-landing aircraft.”

In Brown’s estimation, and this was from the man who would become the world’s foremost aerial test pilot, the F4F had a superior rate of roll, steeper angle of climb, and it was more stable and faster in a dive than the newest British carrier based fighter coming off the production lines, the Seafire IIC. The British Hurricane, however, could outturn the Wildcat, and it could use its superior acceleration in a dive to evade an attack from behind. Yet the Wildcat was far faster in level flight. Every plane had its strengths and weaknesses.

The Wildcat, and the Martlet, was also found to have excessive carbon monoxide buildup in the canopy, insufficient pilot armor, and it lacked self sealing fuel tanks. It may have been faster than a Seafire, but it was still slower than the Me-109, by a full 60MPH. And when up against the German FW-190A, the advantages of the enemy plane dominated the interaction completely. The Japanese certainly had little trouble dealing with the Wildcat in the Pacific, and that news was just filtering in. It was dampening down the night like a heavy fog, for it appeared that no matter how many new planes he tested, the enemy always seemed to have something better.

“Blokes say the Japanese have a fighter that can run rings around this American plane,” said Sheepy Lamb, a heavy set, round faced Scot.

“Blokes can say what they want,” said Brown. “It’s the pilot that runs the rings. Know how to get the best out of your aircraft, and you will too.” The Lieutenant had learned his own craft well, deemed an “exceptional” pilot by his first flight instructors, and prone to a lot of acrobatics when he flew.

“You reckon we can beat the 109 in this?” asked Lamb.

“Certainly!” Brown was all guts. “Just get on their tail and give ‘em those Brownings. We got ourselves a Condor last September, and another one last month. One day we may get our chance against the 109s.” Brown had been credited with one of those kills, the first one going to their flight leader, then Lieutenant Commander John Wintour, though he lost his life with the effort.

Lamb nodded, thinking that might be easier said than done. He sighed, his Scottish temperament just a little off today. Normally he was a red cheeked and lively lad, and one of the few pilots with some carrier experience on both *Ark Royal* and *Glorious*, but Brown figured it was the recent loss of their Flight CO John Wintour that was still bothering him, and knew as much when Lamb went on.

“We paid a high price for one of those planes.” They had lost Wintour when he got abreast of the Condor and was killed by a side gunner’s 20mm cannon right into his cockpit.

“Nothing comes easy,” said Brown. “Take a lesson from Johnny’s death. Condor is an easy plane to shoot down, but you stay on its tail feathers. Either that, or come right at the nose. That’s how I got that plane last month—hit the damn thing right on the nose, and got the pilots, the same way they got Johnny. Don’t get cheeky like the Lieutenant Commander and come in where those side guns can hit you, or you’ll get a nasty sting.”

“You figure the Germans will be out here soon?” asked Lamb. “You figure we’ll be up against the *Hindenburg* again?”

“Possibly,” said Brown. “But we stuck it to *Graf Zeppelin*, didn’t we?”

“And lost the *Rodney*.”

“Like I said, nothing comes easy.”

“Did you hear the news?” Lamb reached for a cigarette. “They say the Japanese had six carriers there at Pearl Harbor. Six! Can you imagine that? They must have put up over 350 planes in that air raid.”

“Damn impressive,” said Brown. “Carriers will be top dog out here soon enough.”

“Not much of a bulldog with this one,” said Lamb. “It’s an old German freighter! We haven’t even got a proper hanger deck, just the one bloody flight deck, and that’s only 420 feet. No wonder we can only carry six or eight of these new planes. They’ve got to fix them, arm them, fuel them, and spot everything right here on this deck, which leaves us no more than 300 feet for takeoff, and only two cables to try and catch the hook on landing. God help us if one of those German *Stukas* puts a nice fat bomb down on top of us.”

“Now none of that talk,” said Brown. “That’s why we’re here—to make sure those planes never get anywhere near the bloody ships.”

“Just saying,” said Lamb with a shrug. “You can sound all smug and confident, cause they made you flight leader instead of me. When I get the job, I’ll be the one bucking the other lads up. For now, a good mash and a complaint or two is no bother. I was on *Ark Royal* once, and this thing is half her size. So I wish they’d sent us to *Glorious*.”

“Won’t find quarters good as these on *Glorious*,” Brown countered. The old German freight liner had also retained its twelve passenger cabins, which were now the relatively plush domains of the Martlet pilots. They were on the lower deck, now called the “Promenade Deck” by the men, because the old staterooms, cabins, dining halls, lounge and wardroom were still there.

802 Squadron had first gone to sea with the senior carrier on the watch, HMS *Glorious*, though these men were mostly new recruits. That ship had already experienced many harrowing encounters with the Germans, narrowly escaping a sure death at the hands of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, then getting in on the action at Mers-el-Kebir, the battle that made an enemy of a proud but defeated foe, sending France into the Axis orbit. *Glorious*, and her enterprising young Captain Christopher Wells, had run cover for operations

aimed at reinforcing Malta before the Germans took that other jewel from the Crown. The ship had then supported the ill fated raid on Dakar, where the French Navy held off the British in a running gun battle that saw the loss of the old battleship *Barham*. More recently, *Glorious* had been a part of the air operations over the fleet in opposing the German sortie of the *Hindenburg*. Now *Audacity* would run with her big sister, which carried all the strike planes in the new Albacores, and one more Squadron of Martlets.

"If you miss the wires, just give it the throttle and come round for another try. And that said, there's always *Glorious* out there for backup if you can't find this little steel matchbox," said Brown, pointing to the deck. "Land over there and you'll get a good chewing out, but that'll leave us all the more room here."

"I can't land over there," said Lamb. "Otherwise who'll lead Red Section over here? That's you and me, the two of us. Each pair of pilots make a section here on this ship. How many more ways can they find to divide a Squadron up? We've got eight planes, and four sections, Red, Green, Yellow and Black. Georgie over there is the spare tire."

"Right... Well, let's hope we don't have a blowout."

It was a deadly game out in the Atlantic now, and no place for slackards. The Germans would send out groups of twelve to sixteen planes, all looking for convoys. When they spotted one, they would then vector the Wolfpacks in. It was *Audacity's* job to foil that reconnaissance effort, and to harry any U-Boat they might find on the surface. Since that last big engagement in May, the Germans had been content to leave their surface fleet in French Ports, and in Gibraltar. But now, as the news of Japan's entry into the war, and by extension, the United States' entry, all the talk had been on what might happen next. The French had been moving big surface ships into Casablanca, and now the Germans had sortied with a strong battlegroup as well, the dreadful *Hindenburg*, and his shadow, the *Bismarck*. Soon it would be serious business out here, thought Brown.

That night they slept in their plush quarters, just a little uneasy with all the news. There had been another big convoy action in the Pacific, and this time the Japanese and French mixed it up with the Yanks and Aussies. The American heavy cruiser *Houston* had been lost, and a big transport ship carrying aviation gas. But the French had lost their only carrier, the *Bearn*. Everything comes with a price tag, he said to himself again, wondering what the cost would be for HMS *Audacity* and the nine sleeping pilots aboard that

night.

* * *

It was another day, and another mission, come all too soon after that dark Atlantic night. HMS *Audacity* was on wide escort, covering Convoy HG 76 even as the German Wolfpack closed in. It was Sheepy Lamb who spotted the enemy first, seeing the foamy bow wave of a submarine below them and sending the signal call to Winkle. “*Tally Ho!* Look to starboard! U-Boat in the water, and she’s going under.”

Winkle saw him tip his wings over and roll down to make a run on the sea serpent, and he soon followed, right on Sheepy’s tail. Yet U-131, was quick that day, and was under the sea even as they let loose on the boat, seeing their MG rounds zip into the water around that periscope mast. They spread the word that the enemy was near, calling in a pack of nipping hounds in those seven corvettes escorting the convoy. Then it was back to *Audacity*, to land before darkness made that job even more difficult than it already would be.

The alarm had been sounded, and the torch was passed to Commander Frederick John Walker, a pipe smoking, whisky drinking old salt, who looked rather dashing in his navy blue jacket. He was aboard the 1200 ton ASW sloop *Stork* that night. It wasn’t a speedy destroyer at a whisker over 18 knots, but that was plenty fast for convoy duty where some of the ships would plod along at speeds of only 10 knots. The *Stork* had six 4-inchers doubling as AA guns, and four more 0.5 inch 13mm machineguns. Her real threat to subs was the rack of depth charges she carried, and old “Johnny Walker” knew how to use them.

Walker would become an expert in ASW warfare, and help change the course of the Tide of Fortune in the Atlantic with this very battle. He came up with any number of innovative tactics, always seeing his charge as a real hunt for the enemy, and not a passive defensive assignment. So it was that he would often play a favorite tune over the ship’s Tannoy loudspeaker when he went into action, *A Hunting We Will Go!*

He developed many new methods in that hunt, the “creeping attack,” where two boats would pay a stealthy cat and mouse game with their enemy below, and then again a thunderous “barrage attack” where a line of three or more sloops would make a saturation attack with their depth charges.

Winkle Brown had put Walker on to the enemy, and he was quick to the scene with his hunting song blaring on the loudspeaker. He would get U-131 that night, and the Sea Robbers would have a difficult time of things thereafter. They would lose four boats, and Johnny Walker and his *Stork* dropped more than a few nasty bundles on the sea, getting two of those kills. Döenitz would call off this costly attack, but not before the Germans got their revenge on the men who had first spotted U-131.

It was a very dark night, and *Audacity* had recovered all her Martlets. Yellow Section had been flown off to the *Argus*, so they were down to just these six planes. They were clustered on the after quarter of the flight deck as always, cabled down to hold them in place against the rolling of that matchbox in the sea. There was an almost eerie quality to the darkness that night, for it was the witching hour, and a time when any remaining U-boats had that darkness as their friend. So *Audacity* was following up the convoy, zigzagging as she went, while Winkle Brown was having his chat with Sheepy Lamb over a cup of coffee.

Suddenly there came a loud explosion, and they soon found that the ship had lost all power to master her steering. They had taken one of those one in a hundred thousand unlucky rudder hits from a torpedo, and the escort carrier was now circling, and quite helpless to forestall further attack. She was alone, could not launch any planes, and Brown got up on deck with Lamb to see something very strange on the sea, about 200 yards off the port side of the ship as it wallowed to a halt.

As he stared at it, Brown could make out the telltale shape of a submarine that had just broken the surface of the water, but something was very odd about it. The hull rippled with a strange green phosphorescence, as if the boat was endowed by some unearthly energy. Lights flashed from its conning tower in an eerie display of otherworldly color.

No man aboard that U-Boat realized it at that moment, but they had been elsewhere for a time, never knowing the dark and distant waters in which they were sailing. If Fedorov had been there, he would have seen something hauntingly familiar in the eerie green light that washed over the boat, and his thumb on the map would have quickly seen the very spot the two vessels were now over, a place called Peake's Deep. It was there that he had hurled the thing Orlov had found in Siberia, the Devil's Teardrop, and though it had plummeted into the depths, it was still working its charm on the sea, and everything in it.

Brown could see the dark silhouette of a man there, *Kapitänleutnant* Gerhard Bigalk of U-751, a Type VIIC boat. He could even see the gold braiding on the man's cap, glinting in the light through that eerie phosphorescence that still surrounded the U-Boat. As the enemy studied their dark silhouette through his field glasses, he was looking at his Knight's Cross in waiting, and just vengeance for the loss of four boats this ship and its exceptional pilot had set in motion. But he knew nothing of that. For Bigalk there was just a sense of relief, as he realized just where and when he must be.

"So it is a British ship after all," said the Kapitan to his 1st Warrant Officer, Hermann Schroder. "We're back!"

"Yes," said Schroder, "back in this damn war again. Look at us! Look at the sea. It's damn strange."

Both sides stared at one another for a long breathless moment. Then one man could no longer abide the silence on *Audacity*, rushing to a 20mm cannon and firing at the German boat. That sealed the carrier's fate.

"Yes," said the *Kapitänleutnant*. "We're back, and there is our welcome. Give them the forward torpedoes, and then let's hope Saint Nazaire is still where it's supposed to be, and get ourselves home."

Three of those torpedoes would strike the carrier, one aft to put an end to the engines, and the other two right forward, where a reservoir of Avgas exploded and blew the bow clean off the ship. There were 400 men on the flight deck, called up by the Captain as he thought they had a fair chance of getting safely into the sea from that level. But the chaos that ensued was like a scene out of an action horror movie.

Audacity gulped water from her shattered bow, going nose down in a matter of minutes. As it did so, the stern literally rose out of the sea, damaged rudder dangling like a broken foot, and the angle of ascent slowly increased. Brown saw men already jumping into the sea, and he and Sheepy Lamb took the plunge, glad they at least had a Mae West life preserver on to keep them afloat. But then they heard the snapping of the cables that held those six Martlets in place on the aft deck, and to their horror, they saw all six planes careen down the whole length of the flight deck, cutting right through hundreds of men there.

Instinct took over, and both Brown and Lamb swam for their lives. As *Audacity* started to slip beneath the dark oily sea, they could hear the loud crack of doom as the pressure of the intrushing water crushed segments of the

ship.

So ended the brief career of Britain's first light escort carrier, but in its first sortie into the Atlantic it was enough to establish proof of concept. The Allies would build 43 more of them to serve in the Royal Navy before the war was over, at least in Fedorov's history. They would win the Battle of the Atlantic there, but it remained to be seen if the Tide of Fortune would carry the legacy of *Audacity* onto that hallowed shore.

As for Winkle and Sheepy, they went into the water in a group of 24 men, and they huddled together, thinking help would soon be at hand and they might all make it out. They talked of what had happened, the long three day battle against the Wolfpack, and the loss of their ship and so many men at the end. Yet it was January, in the dead of winter, and it was cold in the sea at night, even in these latitudes. One by one, the men stopped talking, and some fell forward, seemingly asleep, and they drowned. Those that couldn't stay awake and hold on had to be cut loose from the group by the living, and slowly, the circle of life diminished. In the end there were only two of the 24 men alive when they were finally picked up—Winkle Brown and Sheepy Lamb.

Days later, when U-751 finally reached Bordeaux, her crew was not surprised to learn they had been presumed lost, months ago, for the boat had gone out as one of seven assigned to Wolfpack *Reisswolf* in late October of 1941. "Where were you?" the docking crews wanted to know. "We thought you were gone for good."

"So did we," said the *Kapitänleutnant*, but he would say nothing more, nor would any of the men aboard ever speak about the strange absence of the U-Boat all those weeks. As fate would have it, another boat in that same Wolfpack would have a unusual life line, U-73 under Helmut Rosenbaum, the man who would sink the *Eagle*, and have a strange encounter with a very mysterious ship.

One of the service men assigned to re-provision U-751 scratched his head when he went to test the fuel level in the boat. Gone all that time, U-751 should have been dry as a bone, and probably running on vapor, he thought. But that was not the case. There was enough fuel in the boat to operate for weeks, and he never found out why.

Kapitänleutnant Gerhard Bigalk had only one kill in the war before he crept up on *Audacity* that night, and when he was out on the town celebrating his Knight's Cross, another sailor overheard him say something very odd. "I

finally got my third kill,” he grinned, “and something worth the torpedo this time.”

Just where he had been on his submarine all those weeks, and how his tally of ships sunk would differ from the official German record, was a mystery that would remain unspoken of for many years.

Part X

Condor

*“It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations,
if you live near him.”*

—**J. R. R. Tolkien**, *The Hobbit*

Chapter 28

The German Plans for Operation Condor had been watched quietly by the British for some time. Their secret spy operation in Gibraltar, a so called “stay behind cave” where men had been hidden in an undiscovered passage that was sealed off before the evacuation, was most enlightening. It reported on the ships anchored at Gibraltar, notably the *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*. Yet of far greater interest were the slow arrivals of transport ships from Toulon, and the British in North Africa had not failed to notice the withdrawal of a regiment of mountain troops from Rommel’s defiant Afrika Korps. They also saw the quiet removal of airborne troops from Syria, a move that brought some relief, as the Australians were about to leave their post there and head for the Pacific.

Then British planners began to wonder just where these troops were being redeployed. They did not go to Russia as expected, but moved through Italy to Gibraltar and then down into Morocco. That was when the Admiralty, and Bletchley Park, began to unravel the German plan.

Tovey had taken Admiral Volsky with him to the Azores, where the British Admiral revealed the hidden little fleet of modern day transports secreted away there, and briefed him again as to the existence of the *Argos Fire*.

“So you see, Admiral, that little key you carried to me in your secret jacket pocket might well unlock more than you realize in this war.” The translator finished the briefing, sitting quietly.

Volsky shook his head, still somewhat bewildered by all of this, yet realizing he was part and parcel with it all, a man from a distant future marooned in the turbulent and dangerous waters of WWII. Marooned... that was the perfect word for how he felt now, bereft of his command, and not even really knowing what had happened to his ship and crew. He often thought of Fedorov, wondering as to his fate, and whether Karpov had been able to see through his deception, but there had been no news of him at all.

Tovey could see his discomfiture, and so as far as he was able, he kept Volsky at the heart of all their deliberations and plans. “You are a most useful and resourceful man,” he told him. “Believe me, I do not say this merely to flatter you, or even to bolster your morale. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“Yet that was another man,” said Volsky. “And I still can hardly

comprehend that he was with you over a year ago, and now here I stand as his replacement.”

“Yes, it seems you people just won’t stay put, bouncing from one year to another, but you are every bit that same man, Admiral, and I stand here before you with the unique perspective of knowing all the potential within you. I have every faith that you will be of the greatest possible service here in these events, which is why I invite you to sail with me in HMS *Invincible*.”

“You are most gracious, sir, and I will gratefully accept.”

“Remember also that you have knowledge of all the history yet to unfold, which can be most useful.”

“I know the broad strokes,” said Volsky, “but I relied on Mister Fedorov for all the fine points.”

“We all did while he was with us,” said Tovey. “And the astounding fact that he retained all the memories of the time he spent with us is most promising. It could mean that these odd recollections I have in my own head might one day become graspable, or that you might recover your own memory of those events.”

Volsky nodded, wondering about that, though he still remained clueless of most everything he had learned here. “This other man that visited. What was his name again?”

“Ah, you mean Professor Dorland. Yes, he’s a most interesting case, completely unexpected. All I can fathom of it is that the possibility and practical application of this traveling through time originates from your day, and so here you all are, wandering about in our world. The professor tried to explain it all to me, but it’s a very slippery fish.”

That expression prompted an odd moment for Volsky. “Slippery fish,” he repeated quietly. Somehow the phrase, particularly in the context of this discussion concerning movement in time, seemed to tingle in his brain, prompting one of those unaccountable feelings of recollection. He was almost certain he had heard that expression before, but not spoken by Tovey. Frustration followed when he could not retrieve the memory.

“Then this man, this American Physics Professor, he’s come from our time as well?”

“That is what he claims.”

“Yet our displacement in time was accidental. You tell me now that he was able to do this deliberately, coming to this very place to meet with you?”

“Correct. Frankly, I couldn’t begin to explain how he pulled that little

trick off, but he was here, and seeing is believing.”

“And this man seems to think these keys are of particular importance?”

“That is what we have come to believe. Our Miss Fairchild put us on to that. It’s a very circuitous story, and apparently I’m at the root of it all somehow, though you see, that was another man wearing my cap, my old shadow, or at least I’ve come to understand it that way.”

Volsky smiled. “We are two old bears in the same den,” he said. “I hope you like good vodka, Admiral. But tell me, you say that all these keys must be found, but one was lost on your battleship. Doesn’t that make this a fruitless quest?”

“That’s where this Professor Dorland promises to make himself handy,” said Tovey. “You see, his ability to pick and choose the doors he opens and walks through is most interesting. Yes, when old *Rodney* went down, we lost our chance of getting hold of that key—in this moment. But the Professor claims he can find it somewhere else, and at some other time. He’s done a good bit of research on the whole affair. Our own Lord Elgin was the original culprit, though I don’t suppose he had any idea what he had in hand when he pilfered the marbles from the Parthenon. That’s where the key was, right there embedded in the base of the Selene Horse.”

“How did it get there?” Volsky asked the most obvious question.

“There was some discussion of that, but the short answer is that we simply don’t know. Clearly it was put there by someone. In fact, it seems to me that it was carefully hidden, though I can’t imagine why.”

“And you say this Miss Fairchild also possessed such a key?”

“She did, and yet even she has no idea where she got the damn thing. It was given to her, entrusted to her by this organization I’m supposed to have founded. How they came by it remains a mystery, at least to me.”

“How many of these keys are there?”

“We have two in hand, thanks to you,” said Tovey. “Miss Fairchild tells me she was aware of the existence of one more, and then we have the key we lost on *Rodney*. If this Professor Dorland can manage to retrieve that somehow, all the better, but I’m as confused as you seem to be as to what we will do with them.”

“How did my Mister Fedorov come by one?” asked Volsky.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I had hoped he might have told you something about it.”

“He may have, but I’ve been told so many incredible things of late that I

cannot sort them out. The one thing I remember was that I was to get to you with that key, and thankfully, here we are.”

Tovey nodded. “Unless this Professor Dorland reappears, I suppose we’ll remain in the dark about it. Yet all these keys were supposed to have been associated with a place. That American Physicist indicated how that was done, with a very precisely engraved set of numbers on the shaft of the key—geographic coordinates. Well that doesn’t seem to be the case with the key you’ve delivered. There’s nothing engraved on it at all, and the Fairchild people had a good long look at it.”

“Another mystery,” said Volsky.

“We’ll have to leave it at that for the moment,” said Tovey. “The only mystery before us now seems to be what the Germans may be up to with all these naval movements. Our Mister Turing at Bletchley Park says he believes an invasion of the Canary Islands is afoot. That would explain the movement of troops into Morocco, particularly the German airborne forces. It would also explain why the Germans slipped out of Gibraltar for Casablanca. That’s the sort of problem that lands on my desk for a solution, and it’s rather formidable. The French have also moved two battleships out of the Mediterranean, the *Normandie* and *Richelieu*. Alongside *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*, that is a very grave threat.”

“I see,” said Volsky. “Then you believe this operation is imminent?”

“Turing seems to believe this, and I’ve learned to pay attention when that man tells me something. I’ve therefore assembled as much of a fleet as I could pull together. We’ve two aircraft carriers, *Glorious* and *Victorious*, along with some light escort carriers. The recent developments in the far east have put yet another problem before me. We’ve lost Hong Kong, but Churchill wants a substantial defense mounted for Singapore. He was asking me to send battleships, but I managed to persuade him otherwise—barely.”

“That was wise,” said Volsky. “If I am not mistaken, two were sent in the history I know, and the Japanese sunk both of them.”

“So I’ve been told. Well, now the Prime Minister has moved on to aircraft carriers. He was rather insistent, and so I’ve had to send *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* into the Indian Ocean to forestall any Japanese overseas move against Burma. Admiral Somerville of Force H will take that watch, and I’ve moved Admiral Harwood into his old post. With *Furious* up near the Faeroes, *Formidable* at Scapa Flow, and *Eagle* at Alexandria, that leaves us three carriers here, counting *Argus*. Unfortunately, we lost a light escort

carrier last night, *Audacity*. She was the first off the line, more an experiment than anything else, but we're building more."

"That would also be wise," said Volsky. "And the enemy?"

"That's where the bad news comes along. Up until now, we haven't faced the full strength of the French Navy, but all intelligence indicates that is about to change. We've seen a good deal of movement out of Toulon. They have reconstituted the *Force de Raid*, basing it at Casablanca with those battleships at its heart. That along with the German flotilla would be more than enough for us to manage, but I'm afraid the French have more to say about the matter—a good deal more. *Jean Bart*, *Dunkerque* and a number of cruisers and destroyers have also left Toulon. I've notified Cunningham, and he'll have to sortie to put up a brave face in the Eastern Med, but then we get the Italians. If they get in on the party, that will check Cunningham. So it is a real possibility that the French Toulon Group could also break into the Atlantic."

"I am beginning to see your dilemma," said Volsky.

"Quite so. We've had to cancel a number of convoys, re-route others, and by God, we just might be looking at the largest naval engagement since Jutland."

"My ship would weigh heavily in that equation if it were here."

"Once it did that for us. Frankly, you helped us hold the line twice already, and we will never forget that. This time out, we stand on our own, though we do have the *Argos Fire* with us. I've spoken to Miss Fairchild. It seems we had a little windfall with the odd coming of that support flotilla last May. One of those ships was a naval support vessel, and they had a good number of these wonderful naval rockets your ships employ. So that may be one Ace we can play. My battleships will have to be the other face cards."

It was then that a runner came in, cheeks red with his haste. "Excuse me sir. Word from the *Argos*." He handed the Admiral a message, saluting as he left.

Tovey glanced at it quickly, seeing what he feared there. "Wonderful thing this new radar set you people developed. We'll be having uninvited guests soon. The French have sortied from Casablanca."

* * *

It was going to be the largest naval operation of the war in the Atlantic,

until the Allies darkened the shores of France in years to come. Yet that time was still unwritten, something that might be, but also something that was waiting on the outcome of these events before it could ever happen. The operation Raeder had hoped to conclude a full year ago when the Germans seized Gibraltar was now finally underway.

Its opening hours saw flights of German Condor naval recon planes fanning out from their base at Casablanca. Their mission, as always, would be to find and shadow the movements of the Royal Navy, and to pass that information along to the U-boats. Wolfpack *Kondor* had deployed from Bordeaux days earlier, and was now in position, with six boats slowly creeping up on the Canary Islands. While some thought was given to creating a tripwire undersea defense south of Madeira, the Germans realized it would be quickly pierced by swift moving surface fleets, and so they decided to commit the U-Boats to the littoral zone around the islands themselves. With these, there were also three Italian subs, and six more French.

U-595 and U-660 were assigned to the Bocania Strait, the narrow channel between the two islands closest to Morocco, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. It was only 7.5 miles wide, but if closed and controlled, it would join those two islands to make a land barrier that would extend 105 miles from the northern tip of Lanzarote to the southern tip of Fuerteventura. These were the two islands the Germans wanted first, and their plan was a simple one.

The combined Axis fleet would sortie en masse, covering and escorting the precious transports carrying the German 98th Mountain Regiment under General Kübler. That element would hug the coast of Morocco as it moved south from Casablanca, with the Axis fleet a strong protective shield further out to sea. It would receive additional protection from the Luftwaffe land based aircraft, which Goering had provided in massive numbers. With weather grounding planes in Russia, he had combed off the cream of his bombers and fighters there, and sent them to the warmer Mediterranean region in a newly reconstituted 8th Fliegerkorps under von Richthoven.

For fighter cover it would bring 246 Bf-109s, 58 He-111s, and 24 Bf-110s to the battle, with another 16 109-T models flying from the two German carriers. The bomber wing was equally impressive, with 200 land based Ju-87 *Stukas*, another 26 flying from the carriers, 153 Ju-88 bombers, and older 80 Do-17s. Throwing in the 12 Kondors, it all came to 815 planes.

Against this the British found themselves woefully outnumbered. Their

carriers would bring 12 Swordfish, 48 Albacores, 36 Martlets, 36 of the new Seafires, and 18 Fulmars. On the islands they had what they once considered a strong air group composed of 24 Blenheim bombers, 24 Hurricanes and 34 Spitfires, yet all told the British had only 246 planes, outnumbered three to one. The Germans could put one Bf-109 in the air for every British plane, and then their remaining longer range fighters and bombers were all gravy. That edge, plus the fact that the German pilots were tough, veteran flyers from the Russian front, was going to make it almost impossible for the British to contest the air over those islands for very long.

What was now happening was something that the Western Axis powers had never been able to achieve in the Atlantic before. They were employing massive air/sea assets in a well planned operation, with realizable goals. The Royal Navy had never faced such a challenge, and the outcome of the battle was very much in doubt that morning when the first Condors took to the pre-dawn skies.

The greatest air-sea battle of the war was now about to begin.

Chapter 29

The Spanish controlled bases at Sidi Ifini, Tarfaya and El Aioun were Germany's forward outposts in the attack, closest to the islands. It was from these launching points that the German 98th Mountain Regiment had climbed aboard the French transports Raeder had collected, ready to make the dash across to the island of Fuerteventura. Tarfaya was only 60 nautical miles, a distance that could be crossed in just five hours at the sedate 12 knots the convoy would make. The biggest troopships, *Bretagne* and *Rex*, would not be used in this initial phase, as they were detailed to transport the follow up infantry division, assuming Halder could find one.

The only way to stop the initial landing would have to see the Royal Navy alert and ready in the pre-dawn hours of January 21st, but Most of Tovey's Home Fleet, and all of Force H, was still near Madeira, and heading south at their best speed.

The only force in the immediate Island Zone was Force C, consisting of the carrier *Glorious*, battleship *Valiant*, the cruisers *Kenya*, *Nigeria*, *Trinidad*, and *Fiji*, along with twelve destroyers. The Germans knew the main British strength would be on the Grand Canary Island, right in the center of the archipelago. So their effort in the initial crossing would be to secure the large adjacent island of Fuerteventura, and its neighbor to the north, Lanzarote. Once in hand, those islands would receive the supplies ferried from Spanish Morocco, and the Luftwaffe would then forward deploy to the two or three good airfields.

Given the heavy naval forces covering that crossing, Tovey knew that Force C would not be able to contest the German initial landings. He needed time to get south with the heavyweight divisions of the Royal Navy, and only then would the prospect of a strong naval challenge be mounted. If he could win through, besting the Axis fleet, then the German forces moving to those islands would be stranded. That was his gamble, but the question arose as to how and where he could best look for his battle.

"I've conferred with Captain MacRae of the *Argos Fire*," he explained to Admiral Volsky. "He's quite a handy ship there, a very potent air defense cruiser. The Captain has agreed to sail with us to provide fleet air defense, and we will also have our carrier based fighters in reserve."

"Missiles first," said Volsky. "Do not launch your carrier based fighters

until after that ship has concluded its main missile defense.”

“That was exactly what Captain MacRae advised. Sorting out friend from foe when those rockets fly could be a bit dicey, so that will be the order. My plan is to swing down and come into the islands from the northwest. I want to consolidate the fleet here.” He touched a position on the map to the south of a string of four islands that extended in a arc of about 150 nautical miles.

“This little one to the left is Hierro, and we’ve one decent air field there. Next comes Goumera, largely unoccupied without many ports or fields that we found to be useful. Tenerife is this big lamb chop of an island here. We’ve a good port to the north at Santa Cruz, and Langa Airfield there. Here on the right is the prize, the Grand Canary Island. That’s what the Germans will be after in this whole affair. It has the best deep water port at Las Palmas, but the major aerodrome is here farther south near Gondo Bay. Most all our war fighting supplies are on that island, so we simply must hold it. My plan is to wait here, right south of that arc of four islands. Then I can sweep up the channel between the Canaries and Spanish Morocco to try and cut their lifeline. If they want to control those waters, then I should think it will come to blows somewhere here.” He circled the channel between those two last islands that the Germans were even now using to make their initial crossing.

Raeder had insisted the 98th Mountain Regiment move well south to Spanish Morocco, as it was 500 nautical miles up to Casablanca. That would be two days, over 45 hours at sea, and far too risky a crossing. So the Germans moved those troops into Marrakesh by rail, and then by truck down the long dusty roads into Spanish Morocco. The infantry battalions were all at Tarfaya, and their heavy weapons were farther north near Agadair. As opposition was not expected to be heavy in phase one, they could come along after the first two islands had been secured.

The German plan called for a daring night landing by the 7th Flieger Regiment, four battalions in all. One would land on Lanzarote, with the remaining three on Fuerteventura, which was also the target of the 98th Mountain Regiment. Their hope was to get in with a foot in the door before the British air units could matter, and they flew very low over the seas in an effort to sneak in, while the bombers made a grand show to the south, hoping to entice the RAF into action there. The plan worked.

As the skies began to lighten, British pilots were rushing to planes on the airfields, their engines sputtering to life and then roaring as they swept off

the runways and up into the rosy dawn.

The Germans had no expectation of achieving strategic surprise. They knew that the British had carefully observed their naval buildup at Casablanca, and the considerable movement of troops and planes into Spanish Morocco. But tactical surprise was another art, and they labored to keep the British wondering, with a flight of planes that parachuted exploding dummies over the Grand Island, hoping to convince their enemy a landing was underway. As the action unfolded in the 60 to 80 mile wide channel off the mainland of Africa, a miniature version of the Battle of Britain would soon be fought.

Well trained pilots from England marshaled in squadrons of Spitfires, feeling right at home as they swept out to sea. There they would meet the initial waves of Bf-109s flying from Tarfaya and El Aaiun, just across the border in Western Sahara. The initial clash was not so lop sided, as those small airfields could only support three squadrons. Further north at Tan Tan, the Bf-110s had the range to get in the action as well. German light bombers, the old JU-88s and the sleeker Do-17 *Schnellbombers* that were sometimes called “Flying Pencils” were coming in low on their ground attack and sea interdiction runs.

The Spitfires leapt at them, mixing it up with the Bf-109s in a wild melee, and soon the skies were filled with swirling dog fights that saw the British accounting for themselves very well. Most all of the British air power on the islands could get up and over that channel, but the Germans were relying on fighter strength from just those three southern fields in Spanish Morocco. 34 German planes were downed, with more Ju-88s being lost than any other type. In return the Germans got 12 British planes in the initial battles. But the German plan was to air ferry support fighters from the fields farther north, so they hoped to keep feeding wood into the British buzz saw, and eventually wear it down.

The Germans wanted Fuerteventura first, the closest island of the two to the Grand Canary Island. It had wide beaches beneath barren brown hills, just big enough to land the 98th Mountain Regiment by boats launched from the offshore transports. The main object of the attack would be the island capital, Puerto Rosario, with its modest port suitable for future supply landings, and a small airfield nearby. The larger Fuerteventura airport was not built until the 1960s, but there was a small field west of the port in the 1940s, where 324 Squadron operated with 12 Spitfires. There were also two other fields on the

island, both to be occupied by ground assault after the main objectives were secured near the port. One was a 1400 meter gravel field on a plateau near Tefia, the other a secret project of the Abwehr, a 1000 meter field near Cofete in the far south.

There, on the narrow tail of the island closest to the Grand Canary Island, the field had been built by the German Engineer Gustav Winter, doubling as an agent for the Abwehr. The Germans had been courting Franco as early as 1938, eyeing the Canary Islands as ideal sites for U-Boat bases. Winter built a villa there, and there were short rail lines laid down in this area, with excavation in the nearby mountains. When the war started in 1939, local residents were prohibited from entering this narrow peninsula. In spite of this effort, the site was not on the list of initial German objectives, for Winter had to abandon his project when the British occupied the islands in 1940. The field was also too close to the main British defenses at the Grand Canary Harbor, and it was presently occupied by No. 9 Commando, and so it was planned that this field, and Tefia, would be taken well after the initial landings.

In the north, near Puerto Rosario, the Germans would find more of a defense on the ground than they expected. Brigade Group 36 had its HQ right outside Puerto Del Rosario on that field, with two battalions of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Rifles on and north of the harbor. They also had two dozen 25 pounders, a company of engineers and two light flak batteries. The third battalion in the group was the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, about 35 kilometers to the south at the small port of Gran Tarajal.

Between the two forces, A-Company, 36th Recon, patrolled the long coastal road, operating out of the sleepy town of Pozo Negro. It had five Daimler Armored cars, five more Marmon-Herringtons, and three Humbers. As the German parachute landings were meant to seize a series of small coves and beaches south of Puerto Rosario, this company would fire the first shots in defense of the islands. They started north, quickly running right into 1st Company, I Battalion of the 7th Flieger Regiment, and a sharp little firefight ensued.

The German paratroopers went to ground, looking for cover, and the British thought they could push right on through, thinking their enemy had little in the way of AT guns with them. That assumption was correct, for the German Skyhunters had not dropped with their 37mm guns that morning—they were carrying something else. It had come out of long wooden crates

that were trundled down with the troops to the airfield, and carefully packed away in parachute weapons canisters. The British had already tasted their bite in the recently concluded Operation Crusader, but Captain Hamilton's little armored car company had not made their acquaintance—until that morning.

"Cheeky lot this group," he said to his driver. "They're trying to block the road."

"Shall we have ago at them sir?"

Hamilton looked over his shoulder, then waved the cars behind him on. He was going to let *them* have a go at the Germans, but the British would get far more than they expected. They tried to bully on through, relying on the armor and machineguns laying down good suppressive fire, until the first Panzerfaust popped off at the lead Humber. To his amazement, Captain Hamilton saw it blown to pieces, the top hatch thrown up from the explosion inside, and clattering down onto the road. It was the second time an unsuspecting recce column would get such a sting, only here it was far worse. Hamilton quickly lost three of his five Marmon-Herringtons and a Damlier, which dampened his ardor for pushing on up that road considerably.

Further north, the other two battalions had landed and were pulling themselves together, awaiting the arrival of the main assault forces on the transports. Coming in the pre-dawn darkness, the German transports found very little in the way of naval opposition on the sea. The *Zulu* had steam up in little time, slipping out of the small harbor at Puerto Rosario just before sunrise and thinking to run south and scout the coastline for signs of enemy activity. It was quickly pounced on by a squadron of *Stukas*, and the tall spray of their bombs straddling the ship was pearly white as the first rays of the sun illuminated the scene. *Zulu's* Captain Graham saw the small invasion flotilla, and thought to get at the German transports, making a dash at them while German deck crews fired at her with 88's that had been mounted forward and aft to give the little flotilla protection. Heavy seas had slowed down the German *Schweregruppe* just enough to matter as it came down from Casablanca, and it would be another hour before they would reach the scene.

In that interval, brave *Zulu* dashed about, her deck guns firing and getting one or two hits on the transports, starting a small fire aboard the French ship *Sainte Edmond*. But the surreptitious pre-dawn flights of German Ju-52s had made it to their landing zones largely unchallenged, and the battalions of Falschirmjaegers were already on the ground before the air

defense heated up.

Yet the problem for the British when facing an airborne assault was simply not knowing where the next landing would occur. This forced Brigadier Kent-Lemon, of the 36th Brigade, to keep a wary eye over his shoulder near Puerto Del Rosario. He sent 7th Battalion, Queen's Own Royal West Kent down the road to Pozo Negro, as the RAF had spotted the transports near Castillio and a small cove at Salinas. They launched a quick attack from march against a company of German Falschirmjaegers, but the enemy soon consolidated their position, and then hit them with a very sharp counterattack. When the Germans got up additional support from I/98th Mountain Regiment, the British found themselves facing a three battalion assault, and were forced to fall back towards the port.

The British had five battalions on the island, but they were widely scattered, leaving only two near the port, along with a company of engineers, artillery, and flak units. As the situation progressed, Brigadier Kent-Lemon realized this had to be the center of gravity for the German attack, and so he ordered the 5th Buffs up north at Caralejo to abandon their positions there and get to the trucks for the 25 kilometer ride down to Puerto Rosario.

At the same time, the Argyll & Sutherland Highland Battalion was ordered north from Gran Tarajal to support Hamilton's shattered A-Company, which had fallen back to Pozo Negro. When they got to the town, they found it occupied by German paratroopers, with no sign of Hamilton's armored cars. They had taken a little used inland track, thinking to make a retreat to Grand Tarajal, and unable to push further north. This is what the 5th Buffs were ordered to do as well.

As for No. 9 Commando at Winter Field in the south, it was too far to reach the action on foot, and so the order was given to evacuate it to the Grand Canary Island to bolster the forces there. No sea transport was immediately available, but there were six DC-3s on the field, and they attempted to get off for the short flight to the airfield near Gondo bay, but it was apparent that German fighter superiority made even this too risky. The first plane up was attacked, damaged, and forced to return to the short airstrip from which it came, so the Commando wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

The Germans were therefore able to commit their entire assault force to the targeted objective at Puerto Rosario, while the British defense there was only 40% of the force available on the island. The lesson they would learn was that they should concentrate their defense at the key facilities the

Germans would need to control the islands. Trying to hold all the small access ports and isolated airfields was going to cause a dispersal of their limited forces.

By sunset, on that first day, the Germans had seen their 4th *Schwere* Battalion push into the port city of Arreciffe on Lanzarote Island to the north. The Pioneer battalion had completed a march right across the island, making for the airfield at Tafia.

Meanwhile, sailing all night, the main body of the Royal Navy's Home Fleet had joined up with Harwood's Force H. As the long shadows of steel appeared on the horizon, lamps fluttered with signals traffic. Tovey now had the heart of the entire navy at hand, cruising in the wide channels between La Palma, Hierro and Tenerife. They were no more than six hours away from the Axis naval formations hovering off Fuerteventura, where the powerful guns of the battleships had figured prominently in the land engagement.

Only darkness imposed a hushed calm on the scene, but the dawn would bring the third major engagement at sea between these opposed forces, and it would be one for the history books.

Chapter 30

It was a long, anxious night, which the Germans used to good advantage by moving the heavy recon battalion of the 98th Mountain Regiment into Puerto Rosario by sea. The British position on the island was very precarious. The Luftwaffe had given Raeder excellent support over the landing site, protecting both the troop convoys, and the German heavy ships which pounded the shore, the fires being called in by expert spotters in the 7th Flieger Regiment. With no armor to speak of beyond Hamilton's handful of armored cars, the British had no real potential to mount a counterattack, and by day's end they were well outnumbered on the ground.

It was clear that the German plan would swiftly deliver Fuerteventura to Axis control. The question now was how long could they hold it, and that would be answered by what was going to happen at sea.

Admiral Volsky kept staring at the map, deliberating, and decided to stick his thumb in the pie. He asked the translator if Tovey could spare him a moment, and the two men met in the Admiral's stateroom aboard HMS *Invincible*.

"Admiral," said Volsky. "I have considered your plan, but I do not think it would be wise to operate as you indicated earlier—not while the Germans can maintain air superiority over that channel."

"Yes," said Tovey, "I've been reading the reports coming in from the RAF. Our lads put up a brave fight, but every time they banked one direction or another, there was another flight of Messerschmitts."

"Much will depend on the ability of *Argos Fire* to interdict that airspace," said Volsky.

"It's very thick," said Tovey. "RAF tells me the Germans had well over 500 planes in the air today."

Volsky shrugged. "While I do not doubt that is a capable ship, it would have to expend all its available SAMs to control that airspace effectively, and then some. You hold the Grand Island, and as long as you do, the German presence here will never be secure. Their ships will find no harbor capable of servicing and fueling them, so they will have to return to Casablanca, perhaps within 48 hours." Volsky was laying out his reasoning now, and finding a receptive ear in Tovey.

"Why not muster your fleet here, just west of the Grand Island. That is

another 200 kilometers away from those German bases in Morocco—air space you can control because of the challenge that extra range imposes on the enemy. With *Argos Fire*, this would be assured. I believe the Germans will consolidate in Fuerteventura tonight, and tomorrow. Then, they will have to come for your Grand Harbor, and that will be the time to sortie with everything you have. If you do as you suggested earlier, you will be under their air power. In this instance, a counterpunch as I describe might better serve your defense of these islands.”

“Well reasoned,” said Tovey. “I forget that we are still learning the hard lesson that the airplane trumps sea power. I rather like your idea of holding back and then fighting for the center of the board—rather like old General Wellington at Waterloo standing up his men right at the key moment.”

“I believe this would be your best course of action,” said Volsky.

“Well then,” said Tovey, calculating something in his mind. “We’ve replenished at the Azores, but that said, Home Fleet has still come a thousand miles to reach our present position. We’ve good battleships out there, nice and fat where it counts with that armor in the gut. Yet the heart of the fleet stands on short legs. We can linger here for perhaps three days—72 hours, and that is if we cruise at 15 knots or less. After that, its homeward bound, another thousand miles back up to the Azores to refuel. We can’t very well attempt replenishment here with all these German bombers about.”

“Won’t the enemy have the same problem?” asked Volsky.

“In time, but the German ships have better range than our battleships, and by a good measure. And they’re only 500 miles from Casablanca here, half the distance we have to travel. I can select out a small force to replenish in the Grand Harbor, but that would be risky, as it is within the range of those German *Stukas*.”

“If need be, *Argos Fire* should be able to provide adequate air defense for such an operation,” said Volsky. “Perhaps it will not be necessary, and the Germans will come for you as we might hope.”

“Quite so... But I’ve learned to be careful what I wish for,” said Tovey. “Tomorrow we’ll effect a rendezvous with both Force H and Force C. Then the Grand Armada will be fully assembled and ready to clear the decks for action. Did you know that I have the ensign Nelson raised at Trafalgar? I think it will make a nice showing here when we sortie.”

* * *

Be careful what you wish for... That was on the mind of Admiral Raeder that night as well, for things had not exactly gone as smoothly as he might have hoped. The pesky destroyer *Zulu* had set one of the transports afire with some well placed gunfire, but it was a threat from beneath the sea that he had failed to properly consider. Döenitz might have warned him that his surface group was lacking one key component—good destroyers. The French had them, but they were still well north of Lanzarote when the 98th Mountain Regiment landed, and now he received reports that the landing had run into trouble.

It had come in the stealthy approach of the British Submarine *Seawolf*, creeping south, and then turning north to come in slightly southeast of the German landing operation. Her commanding officer, Lieutenant Patrick Lainson Field, wasn't supposed to be there that day. He was to have died in a plane crash on the 16th of December, 1941, shot down over the Bay of Biscay while en-route to Gibraltar. Yet there were no British planes being routed to Gibraltar now, and the route that plane took this time to the Azores was well away from the peril that would have taken his life. So Lieutenant Field survived, one of many thousands of souls who should have died, but lived on in these Altered States.

Seawolf was supposed to have been taken north by another man, his replacement Lt. Richard Prendergast Raikes, whose boat was scheduled for a refit at Blyth. Instead, when the Admiralty got wind of the German Operation against the Canary Islands, Lt. Field had a short leave cancelled, and flew out to rejoin his boat, which was ordered to the Azores. There it replenished, and then moved south to a new patrol station off the Grand Canary Island.

So there was a ghost of a ship, one lonesome and dangerous wolf prowling the dark seas that night, commanded by the flesh and blood figure of a man who should be dead—a Zombie, as Professor Dorland might define him. In Dorland's theory, such men are always wildcards in the deck of fate, for once spared the doom that should have ended their lives, they move and act with unbridled license on the Meridians of time. Their intervention can bring sudden and unexpected derailment to the careful train of events running on the long lines of causality, and this was one such night for Lieutenant Patrick Field.

Ordered to probe east and see what the Germans were bringing to the battle for Fuerteventura, he came on the scene, running submerged, just as the

Destroyer *Zulu* was meeting its fate under the guns of the German battlecruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm*. Thus far, the only real excitement for Field in the navy had been an incident in 1934 in the Pacific, when the steamer *Shuntien* was attacked by pirates between Taku and Chefoo, in the Gulf of Chihl. Field had been a passenger aboard that steamer, and he, along with another Royal Navy officer and 26 crew and passengers, were taken hostage by the pirates.

The attack created a little international drama, when the British dispatched the destroyer HMS *Witch* from their China Station, soon joined by the American warship *John Paul Jones*, and finally the Imperial Japanese cruiser *Tenryu*, coming to the rescue of a merchant taken hostage by the name of Yamamoto. The little flotilla found the pirates in a small squadron of Junks near the Yellow River, and when steel faced off against wood, they were quickly persuaded that the release of their hostages was the wisest choice they could make.

After that it had been humdrum, routine service for the Lieutenant until the war started. He was supposed to have been in on the famous hunt for the *Bismarck* in May of 1941, but that had never happened. Now he looked through his periscope at the German transports, when the dark night suddenly rippled with fire in the far distance. There, he clearly saw the towering silhouette of a great warship, not even knowing that he was looking at the mighty *Hindenburg*. It had been framed with the light of *Bismarck*'s salvo in support of the German attack, and Field's heart thumped faster as he beat his crew to quarters, loading all six of his forward tubes. There before him were six transports, one quite large and looking like a steamship liner, but his eyes were riveted on that battleship.

He lined up in that breathless moment before firing, realizing that there were no German destroyers present. They must have thought the cover of darkness, and those two imposing battleships, would make them invulnerable. There they were, *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*, two of the most famous ships in the world, but this night would belong to a *Zombie* on the *Seawolf*, and he would record his first real hit of the war when one of those 21 inch torpedoes struck the German flagship right beneath Anton turret, the domain of one Axel Faust.

The explosion was enough to get through the thinner armor there, and minor flooding resulted—until it reached the interior compartments of the magazine for Faust's guns. He went down to see what the trouble was,

outraged to learn that the water was soon three feet deep. Many powder bags had been spoiled on the lower rack, and the crews could not operate the heavy equipment that would haul those massive shells up to the gun above. In effect, without putting a scratch on the turret, or harming anyone inside, Anton turret was out of business.

Torpedo number two in that same spread struck the cargo ship *Sainte Jacqueline*, and had a much easier time. The damage there was severe, and it would send the ship to the bottom in thirty minutes, along with a good deal of the heavy weapons that were still waiting to be off-loaded for the 98th Mountain Regiment. Most of the infantry made it ashore with rifles, machineguns and light mortars. But *Sainte Jacqueline* would take the three 88s they had sweated blood to procure, six 37mm AT guns, a number of 75mm mountain guns, heavier mortars, and considerable stores of ammunition, all to the bottom of the sea.

Admiral Raeder would get the news late that night, his face reddening as he realized the navy was simply not prepared with all the assets needed to sustain an operation of this scale. He had clucked to Halder about the transports he had collected, but he realized now that this was a ragtag affair. The Kriegsmarine was simply not prepared for amphibious warfare, and only the skill of the Luftwaffe in landing the 7th Flieger Regiment had made this attack even possible. The thought that Goring would lord it over him now was another irritation. Yet facts were facts. Those mountain troops, General Kübler's best, had not been well served tonight.

Damn, he thought. *Hindenburg* damaged before the Royal Navy even shows up for a fight, and the loss of that transport pulls the teeth of the 98th Regiment at the same time. Give me three destroyers, and this would not have happened. Yet when we broke out into the Atlantic, it was with every expectation of raiding alone with those battleships. I should have brought that lone destroyer we had at Gibraltar along. Now we are trying to operate like a fleet, and we have neither the logistical support ships in place to sustain these operations, no underway replenishment capability beyond a rendezvous with a tanker, no light vessels required for anti-submarine defense, and proper screening. This puts me in a difficult situation. I cannot protect my ships without destroyers, and if the French cannot provide them, I will have no choice other than to recall my *Schweregruppe* to Casablanca. It gave the British a nasty morning, but it cannot operate alone off these islands any longer. We need destroyers!

He signaled Admiral Laborde, informing him of the situation, and received a prompt reply. The French had six destroyers still sitting in the harbor at Casablanca. They would be dispatched immediately. Given the urgency of this operation, Raeder then signaled *Hindenburg* that they were to do everything possible to keep the ship operational for another 48 hours. The engineers worked all night below decks, and the pumps were able to clear the flooding three hours before sunrise.

Axel Faust was personally supervising the situation, hovering over his heavy 16-inch shells like a mother hen counting eggs. *Hindenburg* had an upper magazine where four shells could be stored for ready ammo in a heated battle. It was normally not used, due to the added danger it would bring to the turret should it take a hit there, but in this case, Faust insisted he have four shells at the ready, and one in each of his two guns. He worked all night, making sure his powder was dry, because an inner sixth sense told him a big battle was coming, and he wanted *Hindenburg* ready to meet it in the best shape possible.

So the man who should have been dead, on a submarine that should have been somewhere else, put his torpedo into a ship that never was, and the twisting gyre of fate would tighten and swirl around that event as the midnight hour passed into the blackness of the South Atlantic.

* * *

When Kapitan Adler got the news, and the order from Raeder, he was quick to comply. With the flooding controlled, he took his flotilla northeast to rendezvous with those six destroyers. Light Squadron 2 was sending two Destroyer Divisions, Number 8 under Captain Barnaud with *L'Indomptable*, *Le Malin*, and *Le Triomphant*, and Number 10 under Captain Still with *L'Fantasque*, *L'Audacieux*, and *Le Terrible*. They represented the entirety of the fast ocean going destroyer class that had astounded the world of naval shipbuilders when they first appeared. At about 3400 long tons full load, they were among the fastest ships in the world, capable of 45 knots, and very well armed.

In the meantime, aboard the carrier *Goeben*, Marco Ritter and Hans Rudel were having coffee together after a long day.

"Where is the Royal Navy?" said Rudel. "I need to put my nice fat bombs right down the stack of another battleship or two. All I had today was

ground support missions for the Falschirmjaegers.”

“I had better fare,” said Ritter. “Three kills today, those damn Albacores that tried to surprise us this morning. They came in low over the sea, on the west side of the island, and then tried to slip through a pass in the highlands to get at the landing operation. But I stopped them.”

“Good for you,” said Rudel, “but we lost a ship today. Fleet defense is our number one mission, and something got through.”

“It wasn’t a plane,” said Ritter. “It was a goddamned U-boat. They have them too.”

“Just the same, we have to be a little sharper tomorrow,” said Rudel. “I’m going to get down low tomorrow and see if I can spot anything lurking about. Can you give me some top cover?”

“My pleasure. You going to spear a U-Boat? With what? You don’t carry torpedoes, Rudel.”

“A couple 500 pound bombs will do the job.” The *Stuka* pilot was confident, for he would go on to become Germany’s number one killer in the JU-87, even though he was missing out on all the action on the Eastern front. Another man might best him now in sheer numbers of tanks killed, but the tonnage he would put under the sea with his plane would exceed all the tanks he might have otherwise killed.

And he was going to start adding to his credits very soon.

Part XI

The Dragon

“My armor is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!”

—J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit*

Chapter 31

The Germans were finally realizing how difficult the task before them would be. The three southern airfields, El Aaiun, Tarfaya, and Tan-Tan were the only bases that could get a Bf-109 out over the invasion zone, and the northernmost field at Tan-Tan saw the planes needing drop tanks to even get to the scene. Those three fields were also going to be at the far end of the German logistical chain, with a long overland haul of 400 to 500 miles by truck for supplies, and aviation fuel.

Most of that fuel would have to come by sea to really sustain operations, for the simple truth of war was that grey steel needed black oil. It was more precious a commodity than the ammunition for the planes and ships. Without ammo, a ship could at least run, but without fuel it could do nothing at all. For this there was only a single French oiler available for the job, another ghost ship that was supposed to be at the bottom of the sea, the *Rhône*. It had been on the Casablanca-Dakar route, and was mistakenly torpedoed by a German U-boat. But the warm embrace of the French Navy after Mers-El Kebir and the battles with the Royal Navy off Dakar had prevented that.

So now the *Rhône*, and every man alive aboard, were another ship of Zombies on the loose in this history, and they were going to matter a very great deal. The ship was at Casablanca with a full load of aviation fuel for those forward airfields to the south, and was now making for the tiny coastal port of Quatia, where the barrels could be off loaded on the short quay and then trucked twelve miles east to the airfield. One of the two destroyer divisions coming south was along with *Rhône* for security. While the other division raced ahead to support the German battlegroup.

Admiral Volsky had been correct. The Germans needed all that night, and then all the next day to catch their breath, mop up the last British resistance on Fuerteventura, and reorganize their logistical train. It was the unglamorous, yet essential aspect of war that the Generals and Admirals seldom spoke of, yet it has been said that in war, the amateurs talk strategy, while the real professionals talk logistics. Raeder was trying to be a real professional now, struggling to grasp all these new missions his navy would have to undertake to support the apple of his eye should Operation Condor be successful.

The Germans were leap fogging additional planes to the south, and that

night, the first Bf-109s of III/JG 77 landed at Tefia airfield on Fuerteventura, which had been seized late that afternoon by the pioneer battalion of 1st Mountain Division after a 15 kilometer trek through the high country. The main airfield near Puerto Del Rosario was still too close to the fighting underway there, and upon inspection, the first service teams to arrive there shook their heads in utter dismay.

Raeder's *Schweregruppe* had been very unkind with the British defending that field. It had received numerous salvoes from both *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*, and the result found the field deeply cratered from the heavy pounding they had delivered. Had this been an American run operation in the Pacific, a battalion of naval engineers, the intrepid "Seabees" would have landed with heavy equipment to get that field back into operation, but there was no such formation in the German Army or Navy. The damage to the port was also extensive, with piers leveled, and warehouse facilities with the two cranes there completely destroyed. The Germans had captured the town, but there was little in the way of a port there.

Logistics... As the war progressed, it would become a supreme effort for the Allies as they planned their long counteroffensives against the Axis forces. They would literally bring a port with them for the Normandy invasion in Fedorov's history, but again, Admiral Raeder had no such capabilities. Supplying the forces already ashore on Fuerteventura would not be easy, and he would soon have to roll up his sleeves and simply improvise.

"I am going to recall the *Prince Heinrich*," he said to Döenitz in their strategy session meeting with Goring. "The Luftwaffe is providing more than adequate air cover, and the few planes that carrier brings will make little difference. Yet it has a sturdy armored flight deck that can be used to load vehicles instead of planes, and its hanger deck can be used to carry considerable stores of supplies."

It was ironic that after laboring so hard and long to produce an aircraft carrier, and gnashing his teeth at the loss of *Graf Zeppelin*, the Admiral would now see his largest operational carrier in theater more useful as a supply ship.

"I will order its air squadrons to fly to Tefia, where they will always be handy when needed. In the short run, we need transport capability for fuel and supplies. *Prince Heinrich* can also serve to carry aviation fuel in its bunkers, but we must labor to get a functional port as soon as possible. We have only one destroyer at Gibraltar, and it will be permanently assigned to

escort *Prinz Heinrich*. I may also assign both *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the *Goeben* to this duty, and then *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg* will simply join Admiral Laborde's heavy squadron for the confrontation that is surely coming if our fleets remain in these waters."

"Can you operate long enough to support Phase II?" asked Goring.

"That will depend on how quickly you can be ready to renew the attack."

"I can give us air superiority today over the channel between Fuerteventura and the Grand Island. Tomorrow I will need that aviation fuel."

"Don't worry," said Raeder. "I spent all night looking for additional logistical support. We salvaged another French tanker at Saint Nazaire, and have put it into service as KMS *Vierlande*. I have ordered it south with a belly full of fuel, but it will be some days reaching us. The French two other ships at Casablanca, the *Marguerite* and *Henri Desprez*. Between the two, we get another 20,000 tons at sea, and they have agreed to put those ships on regular supply runs to any ports we can secure. Tonight the *Marguerite* departs for Arrecife on Lanzarote, as that harbor is in better shape than Puerto Rosario now. The French tanker *Rhône* is already off-loading supplies for Tan-Tan, but it is a slower ship. *Prinz Heinrich* is very fast, and it can fill in until our supply situation stabilizes. I ordered this redeployment last night, and the ship has been at 30 knots ever since. It should arrive back at Casablanca at 16:00, and commence loading operations. Destroyer *Thor* will meet the ship there, and it will get underway again tonight, by midnight. That would see it return to the theater of operations at about 14:00 today, and I plan on hitching a ride on *Thor* to get out there and plant my flag on the *Hindenburg*."

"But can your heavy ships remain here long enough to cover another assault operation?"

"Don't worry about that. *Hindenburg* can remain on station indefinitely. It has enough fuel to go 20,000 miles! *Kaiser Wilhelm* has a dual propulsion system, and her diesel engines can cruise 14,000 miles. *Bismarck* can do 10,000, and it can still operate for another week here with no concerns. I have rigged special hoses on the *Hindenburg*, and they can be used to refuel any destroyers that get thirsty."

"What about that torpedo hit on the *Hindenburg*?"

"The damage has been repaired, at least enough to keep the ship operational. I will have a closer look when I get there."

“Very well,” said Goring. “Then I will keep you advised as to the movement of 22nd Luftland Division to the islands we control. They will relieve the 7th Flieger Regiment, and then we start again.”

“Phase II must proceed as soon as possible,” said Raeder. “Too much is now riding on the outcome of Operation Condor.”

“My airborne troops are certainly riding on it,” said Goring with a wry smile, his fat cheeks red with the wine he had for dinner. “You realize none of this would have been possible without my Luftwaffe.”

“Yes?” Raeder turned to face him. “Then make it your greatest victory, Herr Goring. Success here redresses our failure to properly support the S  elowe plan. We’ve already given the F  hrer Gibraltar and Malta. Now we must rout the British from their haunts in these islands. This will make plans for Operation Isabella much more feasible.”

That was a plan that had been circulating at OKW for some time, involving a more substantial presence in Spain, and defensive strategy should the British attempt an invasion of the Iberian Peninsula. This meant the Germans would make a concerted effort to defeat that invasion, even if it meant occupying Portugal as well. This assumed, of course, that Franco would be amenable, and the Spanish Army would cooperate with the Germans, though that was by no means certain.

Franco had carefully hedged his bets on Germany. He had permitted German troops to utilize his roads, rails and airfields to attack Gibraltar, with the promise that it would come under Spanish administration at the conclusion of the operation. This resulted in an arrangement that was a little like the situation in North Africa, where the titular commander was an Italian General, to whom Rommel supposedly answered. In like manner, there was a Spanish Governor installed at Gibraltar, with a small force of military police. But like Rommel in North Africa, the Germans did what they pleased, irrespective of the wishes of their Italian and Spanish supervisors. The garrison at Gibraltar was entirely composed of German troops, but Franco had a written promise from Hitler that Germany would cede that territory at the conclusion of the war.

Franco knew that was about as secure a promise as the brief non-aggression pact between the Soviets and Germany in early 1940. While Britain remained unbowed, he always kept the possibility of reversing his allegiance in mind. British occupation of the Canary Islands did little to win his favor, and nudged him closer to Hitler’s seat on the train, but he still

reserved certain options in his mind, and slowly identified Generals and other key ministers and army officers that he might count on should he decide to order Spain into widespread opposition to their German tenants. Thus far, Germany held Gibraltar, and had a modest presence on one or two mainland airfields, but even if he may not have known about Operation Isabella, Franco suspected such a plan certainly existed.

Now Germany was invading the Canary Islands, under a new promise that they, too, would be returned to Spanish administration. Franco knew he would only be trading one occupier for another if the Germans prevailed, but seeing that there was nothing he could do about the German plan, he gave a mute blessing to it, and looked the other way. In many ways, Germany was slowly carrying out the broader operation Plan Isabella. It had called for the seizure of Gibraltar, Spain, Portugal, the Canary and Cape Verde Islands. Slowly, but surely, they were ticking off those territories on their list.

“Remember,” said Raeder, “now we have the Americans to worry about.”

“They pose no threat,” said Goring. “They are busy with the Japanese now.”

“At the moment, but they have already begun active support for the British in the North Atlantic. They have sent them 50 destroyers, relieved their garrison on Iceland, and American naval ships now patrol the Denmark Strait. How long before they get serious about prosecuting the war here?”

“Ridiculous,” said Goring. “They have the Atlantic to cross, and Döenitz will make that very uncomfortable for them.”

“Give me these islands and I will do that job much better,” said Döenitz.

“Have you heard Volkov’s predictions on this matter?”

“Volkov? The Prophet? That man is a fool,” said Goring. “He just wasted another good division in that attack into Siberia. Why I ever agreed to support that plan escapes me.”

“You agreed because Hitler ordered it,” Raeder reminded him. “Just as he has ordered us all to secure these islands. As for Volkov, many of his so called prophecies have reached the Fuhrer’s ear. He has argued that the entire future effort of the Anglo-American Alliance will now be to open a second front in the west to relieve the pressure on the Soviets. This certainly makes good strategic sense, and Volkov claims the Allies will attack us here in French North Africa, and in France.”

“If wishes were horses,” said Goring. “Here we are trying to arrange

supplies and fuel transports to support less than two divisions being used in this initial operation. Can you imagine the logistics required for such invasions? To do as Volkov suggests, the Allies will have to first control the Atlantic, and to do that they will have to defeat your fleets, Admiral Raeder, and all our U-Boats.”

“Which is why this coming battle could be decisive,” said Raeder. “We have spotted both Force H from Madeira and the British Home Fleet from the Azores heading south. From this it is clear to me that the British will risk everything here, as we must if we are to succeed.”

“Then how will you proceed?” asked Goring.

“I will not sortie with my heavy ships beyond the range of your land based air support. This is why it is essential that we get functional airfields on Fuerteventura and Lanzarote as soon as possible. Those become your new forward fields to support Phase II. Timeliness is a virtue, but the British fleet has short legs. They can only linger here a few days before they will have to withdraw to replenish. In the meantime, Döenitz, if your U-boats spot any enemy supply shipping, make it your primary target, just as we must now do everything possible to protect the few support ships we have. Gentlemen, let us see what the day brings. With any luck, we will have these first two islands secured by nightfall.”

That was a sound prediction, for the Luftwaffe was now moving in the regiments of the 22nd Air Landing Division, veterans of the Balkans and the campaign in Syria. They had been spared the ravages of service on the Russian Front, as Hitler seemed entirely fascinated with these airborne operations. Volkov’s defeat, a third time at Ilanskiy, gave him pause, but there had been only three German casualties, and the loss of a few planes, mostly for mechanical reasons. He got his Ju-52s back, and a month later, they had moved to French North Africa for this operation. He also got several sets of plans and diagrams, the so called fruits of Volkov’s attack, which were really just information he extracted from his archive. As they all involved the development of jet aircraft and missiles, the Führer was delighted, and excused the military fiasco that had transpired during that operation.

Now, on the 22nd of January, 1942, the British had been pushed out of Puerto Rosario, falling back to a small enclave around the fishing town of Puerte Lajas on a small bay three miles to the north. Their supplies now in German hands, it would not be long before the remainder of the 36th Brigade

would cease to exist.

Yet all these moves were merely preliminaries to the real contest on the board, infantry pawns being moved towards the center. Now it was time for the heavy pieces to sally forth, because everything would ride on the outcome of the impending naval duel.

Chapter 32

“We can’t sit here any longer,” said Tovey. “I’m afraid we will have to take action—either that of the fleet will have to withdraw without making a challenge, and I don’t think that would sit well with our Mister Churchill. I think I must fall back on my original plan, Admiral Volsky, but with one revision. The Germans are relying on these forward airfields, and last night we slipped a pair of cruisers up along the coast from Spanish Sahara to Tarfaya in Morocco. They were able to range on those airfields, and now I want a repeat performance, only with the much heavier guns of my battleships.”

“Then you believe you can knock those fields out of operation?”

“That will be the plan. We’ve put men ashore from a submarine yesterday, and they’ve moved into position to call in the fire. Up until now the Germans have operated with impunity. It’s time they learned the Royal Navy was here.”

It was as good a plan as any, and even though the landward approach through the channel would expose the fleet to air power, Tovey hoped to directly challenge that as he went, taking those southernmost bases out.

That night *Nigeria* led the way, racing up the coast to strike at Tarfaya. Behind her came *Fiji*, *Trinidad*, *Mauritius* and *Kenya*, with the *Renown*, *Repulse* and finally *Valiant* bringing up the rear of Force C, which was also attended by four destroyers. Farther south, Force H and the Home Fleet combined into one massive train of warships. *Norfolk*, *Sheffield* and *Cumberland* led the way, and then came the stolid line of battleships with *Invincible* in the van, followed by three more heavyweights, *King George V*, *Prince of Wales*, and *Duke Of York*. Five more destroyers escorted this group, keeping a watchful ear and eye for German U-Boats. At the rear of the column *Argos Fire* escorted the carrier group composed of *Victorious*, *Glorious* and the light carrier *Argus*. These forces would later break off with six destroyers and reconstitute Force H under Admiral Harwood as the carrier force. The escort carrier *Audacity* was the one missing Gosling, but her story has been told.

Argos Fire was also using her sonar to find anything lurking beneath the sea, and quickly identified two contacts ahead in the channel. Four destroyers were dispatched to investigate, and near Tarfaya, they encountered U-331,

which was hit and sunk, and then engaged U-431 with a hot rush of depth charges rolling into the dark sea. Then Force C followed, and heavy shells began to pound the airfields, catching a good number of *Stukas* on the ground and causing hellfire and chaos. A 15-inch shell would leave a substantial crater where it fell, and those fields would take days to recover, with some pilots giving up and simply looking for any suitable open ground nearby in place of the graded runways they had been using.

The cruisers that hit Tarfaya would leave only 26 of 40 *Stukas* operational, and 21 of 39 Bf-109s. Further south, the much heavier pounding administered by the battlecruisers and *Valiant* would all but obliterate the German squadrons at El Aaiun. III StG 1 was completely destroyed, with not a single plane flyable from the 40 *Stukas* that were operating there, though eight would eventually be repaired and flown to safer airfields to the north. Two hours before dawn, the field was out of the battle. Realizing what was happening, Goring ordered his squadrons to get off to northern airfields as best they could. The *Stukas* made it up to Tan-Tan, and the 109s flew over the channel to the newly captured airfield at Tefia on Fuerteventura.

The RAF prepared to throw what it had left into the plan for morning air cover over the fleet, but taking Volsky's advice, they were to be called to the battle only after *Argos Fire* had its say. There, the ship that had traded its haze grey for dress whites was nonetheless ready for battle. The ship's all seeing SAMPSON radar set was monitoring enemy air activity, which was reduced to a few night patrols that did not directly threaten the fleet. With that ship on the watch, Tovey would know exactly when to expect an enemy air attack, and his gunners would be well ready to face anything that got through.

At a little past 06:00, the radar operators reported the first hostile surface contact. MacRae had those seven GB-7 SSMs available, and they had taken on another ten Harpoons that were aboard the replenishment ships anchored in the Azores. He decided to surprise the enemy with a little missile work in the pre-dawn hours.

Kaiser Wilhelm would take the hit. A single GB-7 missile striking just forward of the main conning tower, and on the port side of the ship. It took out a 150mm secondary battery there, and a twin 20mm AA gun, but did little other damage. The fire that resulted was quickly controlled, and the ship was operational, though the effect on Raeder was most unsettling.

An early riser, he was out on the weather deck of the *Hindenburg* after

flying out in a seaplane to join the ship. He was watching the arrival of the French *Force De Raid* when he saw the missile coming. It was just that one missile, its bright tail clearly marking the way south to disappear over the edge of the sea. Somewhere beyond that horizon, the British fleet was coming for battle. The missile surprised him, for all reports indicated the Soviet raider was no longer in the Atlantic. With a sinking feeling he realized the British had to be firing this weapon, which seemed smaller, and lighter in impact than those reported by his other Kapitans in previous engagements. Could the Russians have given that rocket to the British, or was it simply the result of technology they had shared? If the latter, how could the British have developed their own naval rockets so soon?

These questions were heavy on his mind when the news came of the pounding being received by those southern airfields. The enemy's intentions were now clear to him. They hesitated to engage us under our air power, he thought, but damn if they haven't come up with an answer to that. Both El Aaiun and Tarfaya will be inoperable for some time now, which means the only forward airfields we can rely on for Phase II will be on the islands we've occupied. Yet they, too, could be obliterated by naval gun fire if I do not stop the British at sea. What to do?

He looked over his shoulder, seeing the steel grey shadow of the *Bismarck* following him. Behind them steamed *Richelieu* and then the powerful dreadnought *Normandie*, with those twelve 15-inch guns compared to the eight 16-inchers he had on the *Hindenburg*. The Toulon group was about 40 kilometers away to the northeast, up the coast towards Tan-Tan. It would bring the battleship *Jean Bart*, the battlecruiser *Dunkerque*, with four cruisers and two destroyers. If ever there was a time to fight his decisive battle with the Royal Navy, this was that hour. Unlike Admiral Decoux in the Pacific, he had both the will and the skill to fight at sea, and long years of experience.

This is what I came here for, he thought. This is why I insisted on accompanying the fleet, not only because we lost Admiral Lütjens the last time we face the British, but to avenge his death. I built this navy, and by God, this is my battle. He knew exactly what he was going to do, turning to Adler.

"Let us hope that magazine is dry," he said. "Sound battle stations. Signal *Kaiser Wilhelm* to lead the way ahead. The fleet will make a 15 point turn to port, and increase to battle speed."

“Aye sir!” There was fire in Adler’s eyes, and an equal measure of awe. He had jousting with Lütjens, always seeing his reserve and caution as weakness. In Raeder, however, he thought he recognized a real Fleet Admiral, and now his ardor for battle was back again.

The Franco-German Fleet turned. Like a long steel snake, the lighter cruisers and destroyers fanning out to either side, and the sea white with bow froth as the ships picked up speed. Taken as a whole, it was a great sea dragon, fuming and frothing its way south with bad intent. And it would meet the Royal Bengal Tiger of the seas, the undisputed master of the Atlantic for generations. Once Tovey had stated as much to Admiral Volsky, in that very first meeting they would have before time rolled back on itself and wiped those days from her roll of fate.

“*I must tell you, Admiral,*” he had said once to Volsky. “*The oceans wide may appear to be the province of God, and God alone, but at this moment, as I stand here now before you, they are, in point of fact, the domain of the Royal Navy and the British Empire that built it.*” Now that Empire was facing its gravest challenge in over a century. Its soldiers had sallied forth from England to the aid of France, only to be rolled up in the Tide of Fortune and swept into the English Channel, a broken and defeated remnant of the troops that had first answered the call to arms.

The far flung outposts, long held and guarded by the Crown, were all in jeopardy now, Gibraltar and Malta lost, Egypt holding out, though still imperiled, the Levant contested, and naught but a scratch force holding Iraq. In the Pacific, Hong Kong, a British bastion since 1842, was taken by the enemy, and Percival’s forces were retreating towards Singapore, even while Japanese troops crossed the border from French Indochina into Burma, posing a direct threat to England’s greatest colonial holding, India. Now the Japanese were poised to strike at British mandates in the South Pacific, and holdings of allied states in New Guinea, the Solomons and Gilberts. It was one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen, and now it was all burning in the cauldron of war. All the dominions and protectorates of the Crown were under siege, and the one thing that had made this Empire possible was now at stake—the Royal Navy.

The champions on either side had met before. Tovey had faced down *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* in June of 1940, hounded the *Hindenburg* later as it broke out through the Faeroes Channel, then led the charge in the Mediterranean with *Kirov* at his side against the combined Axis fleets. Only

the presence of that formidable Russian battlecruiser, and the unseen ally beneath the sea in *Kazan*, had enabled the Allies to pull through. Then Tovey, boldly rushing to the aid of HMS *Rodney*, had finally come face to face with Lütjens on the *Hindenburg*, and the two ships had fought to what might be considered a draw, though a badly shaken Kapitan Adler left the field to Tovey, and ran for the safety of a French port.

Now here it came again, a capable and dangerous fleet commanded by an experienced and determined German Admiral. Here it came, with old friends of Britain turned to foes at its back, and though the Russian Admiral Volsky was still at his side, he stood empty handed, bereft of his command, and powerless to do anything more than offer his good advice.

Kaiser Wilhelm had been sent forward, with *Prinz Eugen* following, out to investigate a morning sighting of a British carrier east of El Aaiun. The course they took would bring them right on the horizon of those four British destroyers that had been out after the German U-Boats. They skewered U-331, seeing its wreckage on the surface, and forced U-441 into an emergency dive, hounding her fiercely thereafter... Until the first points of light erupted from those shadows on the horizon, and deadly accurate German fire plunged into the sea all around them. One ship was hit, the wayward Scot in the L-class group, dubbed *Loyal* by the Scottish builders that had put the ship to sea. *Prinz Eugen* was throwing 8-inch shells at the flotilla, but something bigger struck that destroyer, one of the six 15-inch guns on the *Kaiser Wilhelm*.

Seeing the fate of *Loyal*, the other destroyers made smoke and turned away, realizing something powerful was now stalking them, and thinking they would make an easy run to safety with their 36 knot speed. Much to their chagrin, the shadow following them would not be left behind, for *Kaiser Wilhelm*'s long hull and clipper bow made her the fastest battlecruiser in the world. The ship kept pace, with two forward turrets still firing, and would put another shell so close to *Lightning* that the shrapnel would kill a watchmen and two junior officers on the bridge.

They were leading the Germans right towards Force C, and a line of cruisers were soon seen on the horizon ahead, the ships that had just pounded Tarfaya. The first rays of the morning sun were still an hour away, but the skies were already lightening. *Kaiser* radioed the sighting back to Raeder on the *Hindenburg*. "SIGHTED FOUR CRUISERS, Bearing 190, my position. No carrier or aircraft seen."

Raeder was coming at 30 knots, and so he ordered his lead element, *Kaiser* and *Prinz Eugen*, to effect a wide circle, looping away to the west, then north, northeast and around again to the south. That closed the range, for those cruisers were coming on for a fight, but it also cut the distance between Raeder's heavy division.

Back on the *Invincible*, Admiral Tovey was receiving regular position updated from the *Argos Fire*, and now had the distinct advantage of knowing the enemy position, each and every ship, as it came on the scene. The tall mainmast mounting that SAMPSON radar on *Argos Fire* could see aircraft out 400 kilometers. It could see and track over 1000 separate contacts at one time, and perform 150 position update tracks per second. In testing, A SAMPSON system in Portsmouth successfully tracked every aircraft arriving and departing from Heathrow, Stanhead, Gatwick, Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam, all simultaneously, and without fail. It worked in conjunction with another system, the 3D S1850 radar. These were systems designed to find and track things like supersonic and ballistic missiles, and ships utilizing extensive stealth technology in their design. In this environment, they were infallible.

Thus Tovey could see the picture ahead fed to him in those signals and updated on his plot table, the line of contacts coming up on those four cruisers, and he immediately ordered them to break south and fall back on the remainder of Force C.

"At the very least, they'll need a little help from HMS *Valiant* now," he said to Volsky. "It's time we got Home Fleet up there and into the fray."

Tovey could also see the threat to his carriers well before it became dangerous, and gave steering orders to his old protégé, Captain Christopher Wells aboard *Glorious*. The decks of the carrier division were already crowded with planes spotted for takeoff, for the Germans would not fail to send anything that could reach the scene from their more northern airfields. *Stukas* based at Tan-Tan could still range out south of Tarfaya, so they would likely be up soon, along with the Do-17 and Ju-88 bombers from other fields to the north.

The main British force was now coming due north at its best speed of 28 knots. Even though they were burning much more fuel, Tovey was at least comforted to know they were pointed in the right direction. His plan was to sweep up, with *Argos Fire* holding off the enemy air power as long as possible, and then fight his battle. But to do so he would have to operate for

some time in the wide channel between the two long islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote and the African mainland. It would be a hundred miles now before he would find open seas to the west, where he might break to port and head for the Azores. If things went badly, he would not even have the speed to evade his enemy by turning about. Except for *Invincible* and his two battlecruisers, all the heavy ships on the other side were faster than his battleships. So it was do or die now, and Tovey set his mind on that doing.

Chapter 33

Kaiser Wilhelm and *Prinz Eugen* were effectively acting as Raeder's scouting force. When they saw the four British cruisers turn to break away, Kapitan Werner Heinrich on the *Kaiser* smiled. He was an old cruiser man, and he knew that those four ships had turned for a reason. It was not because they feared engagement with the larger German warship. They were ordered to turn, he realized, which meant the main body of the enemy fleet was dead ahead. They were obviously intending to lead me after them into a nice little ambush, but Raeder himself knew what to do, and I would have done the same.

"Say good bye to them, Schirmer," he said to his Gunnery Officer. "That aft turret hasn't cleared its throat."

"Aye sir," said Schirmer, waiting until *Kaiser* had come round to open that firing arc before he blasted away with his aft turret, pleased to see that he put those two rounds very near one of those enemy cruisers. Nothing came back at them, as the range was out at 28,000 yards, and so he figured those were light cruisers out there, most likely with the British Mark XXIII 6-inch naval gun in triple turrets.

"We might have easy pickings," he said to the Kapitan. "I believe those are all light cruisers."

"Perhaps, but we will turn as ordered. Raeder wants to close up for the action, and that rocket that struck us may have come off one of their big brothers further south."

So Heinrich took the ship around in a wide turn, slowing to 30 knots as he did so to allow *Prinz Eugen* to keep up in his wake. The thrum of the turbines lowered, driven by four high pressure boilers producing the steam for the ship. They were so efficient that Chief Engineer, Otto Kremel, would often have to use the relief valve to let off some pressure, which hissed and whined when he did so, like a chesty diva singing one of Wagner's operas. The crew called the boilers 'Wagner's Girls,' and delighted to Kremel's fanciful playing of an opera on the gramophone when he ran at high speed.

Heinrich smiled when he heard the men singing below decks, "*Hi Ho! Hi Ho!*" It was the rousing call from Ride of the Valkyries. When we finish this roundabout, he thought, then let's see what we find. But what is wrong with the radar set? It has been fogged over with heavy interference for the last

hour, and the engineers could not sort it out. And where was the Luftwaffe?

He looked at his watch. The bombers were supposed to be up and over the channel by sunrise, which was very late at this latitude in January, rising at 09:46 in another hour. But the reports that the British were off the coast again tonight should have scattered a few birds. Raeder is playing it very cautious with our aircraft carriers after what happened to the *Graf Zeppelin*. That thought, and these two unusual events involving that rocket attack and the obvious jamming of his radar, was cause for some concern. Yet his ship had weathered the blow, and Schirmer was ready for a fight. He had hit that British destroyer the last time the ship was in action, and at damn near 30,000 meters. *Impulsive* was the unlucky ship that day, broken in two by that 15-inch shell.

The last time he had received such an order to break off, he had been in hot pursuit of the British carrier *Glorious*, smashing that destroyer, and then sinking the cruiser *Gloucester* for good measure. Those ships had bravely engaged his vessel in an uneven duel, only to buy time for that carrier to launch her aircraft. And damn if they didn't get their hit! It was just one of those old Swordfish torpedo bombers, and the thought that a single plane put his ship out of the action and sent it back to France for repairs was still enough to make him shake his head.

Air power, he thought. Those planes are dangerous, and all it takes is one hit in a vital spot to end a ship's career. Yet these naval rockets are even worse. We have nothing to counter them, and cannot answer in kind. But they must be rare, for why else would the enemy be so stingy with them? What might have happened if three or four were fired at *Kaiser Wilhelm* this morning? From every account, not a single one has ever failed to hit its target. *Graf Zeppelin* would have died much sooner had it not been for the sacrifice of our destroyer. Yet Raeder still fights now as if this were Jutland. He has all the big ships in a line of battle. He folded his arms, looking for the dawn. Soon it will be our planes up there, he thought, feeling just a little more comfortable.

At the northern segment of his wide circling turn, he could see the lamps of *Bismarck* winking in salutation. Having a good idea where the enemy was, he replied, "Follow me," and brought his ship around another 15 points. Raeder was timing things very well to coordinate with the Luftwaffe, but as they moved south, and the minutes ticked off without a sighting, the Kapitan was suddenly suspicious.

What would I do here, he thought? Would I be due south, on a line that would eventually intersect the coast of Western Sahara? Not on your life. The sun will be rising off our port side soon. So the British will be maneuvering to get out to sea, not inshore where we could pin them against the coast. Yes, and once they get in position out there, all our ships will be nicely silhouetted against that rising sun. Doesn't Raeder see it?

Minutes later he got his answer, a radio signal to make a thirty point turn to starboard. Of course, thought Kapitan Heinrich with relief. A man does not become the first Grand Admiral of the Fleet since Von Tirpitz without good reason. Raeder had served as Franz von Hipper's Chief of Staff, and on the staff of my own namesake, Prince Heinrich of Prussia. Glad they had the good sense to name our latest carrier appropriately, but it would be better if they get some planes up soon. And speaking of that, this very ship is named after *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and Raeder served aboard that man's private yacht. He fought at Dogger Bank, and at Jutland. In fact, it was his raid aboard the *Lutzow* that aimed to lure the British into a trap at Jutland. What was the Grossadmiral planning this time?

At least he's a fighting Admiral, and he will expect the best we can give him now. When we lost the *Graf Spee*, he issued orders that no German ship would ever be scuttled again. We either fight to win, or we die. One has to admire that kind of spirit in battle. And getting *Tirpitz* home safely with *Scharnhorst* was quite a feat. Who would have thought that Raeder would send them right through the English Channel! Yes, the man has fire in his belly, but a great deal is riding on the outcome of this battle. We've lost two good ships in *Gneisenau* and *Graf Zeppelin*, and that almost sunk the Admiral, and the Kriegsmarine with it. Now we have two ships wounded even before we start this battle.

Thirty points to starboard, and out to sea. If the British run on a parallel course, we'll eventually run out of sea room. One side or another will have to turn.... That is if there are still any ships afloat after this fight.

* * *

Tovey had reconfigured his fleet by grouping all the carriers under the command of Vice Admiral Harwood in Force H, and moving any capital ships there to Force C. The four cruisers Heinrich had sighted now returned to that force, even as a light misty rain began to fall at sunrise. The weather

had closed in quite suddenly from the northwest, and it was going to make visual sighting more difficult for both sides. While Tovey had the benefit of knowing where the enemy was, his gunners still had to sight and hit them with a system that was mostly mechanical.

While the *Hindenburg* group effected a rendezvous with *Kaiser Wilhelm*, Admiral Laborde's *Force De Raid* moved ahead, about five kilometers east of the German task force. With Force C out in front, it would encounter this force to open the action at 18,000 yards. The four cruisers formed a separate battle line, and off their starboard side, and a little behind, was *Repulse*, *Renown* and *Valiant*. Captain George Tenant on *Repulse* wanted to run on ahead, but *Valiant* could only make 24 knots, and so he stayed in formation. Behind these ships came the destroyers *Lookout*, *Lightning*, *Kingston*, and *Hotspur*.

Out on the weather deck, his great coat collar pulled high, Tennant spied the tall battlements of a heavy ship, and immediately ordered both *Renown* and *Repulse* to engage. The sharp report of their initial salvos began the battle at 09:45, just as the first rays of sunlight illuminated the entire scene beneath a thickening deck of grey clouds. In twenty minutes, the sun would rise up through that overcast, and the visibility would fall off dramatically, but for these opening minutes of the duel, sighting was good as the sunlight now gleamed on the water, illuminating the spray at the bow of the oncoming ships and lighting up the shell splash of those initial rounds.

"Bearing true, but short one thousand," called the gunnery director.

"Forward turrets, up 800," came the reply, "Fire by twos." The range was being increased 800 yards, and the resulting shellfall would now be observed yet again before the director sent new information down for "table turning."

Far below, men huddled around the Mark VII Admiralty Fire Control Table, developed in the late 1930s. It might have resembled a large cooking stove, painted a deep avocado green, its metal edges smoothly beveled, and its surface segmented with areas of inlaid glass that covered a morass of dials, tachymeters and other indicators that grinned like clock faces. The corners and vertical sides bristled with hand knobs for the so called "table turning." These were cranks and dials that would allow the operators to input all the data they were receiving, a stack of variables to be computed by this makeshift analog computer, much like a slide rule might deliver mathematical results from analog settings.

The many variables were wind direction and speed, line of flight arrow, gun inclination, target speed across plot, gun deflection, three range settings, actual maximum gun range at present settings, target height scales, the spotting plot, barometer and temperature, ship and target speed, and of course bearing. The handles would be turned to produce a plot suggestion, then shell fall would be observed and the operators would crank handles for the reported error in range to get a new suggestion, and so on. It might have been wonderful if the *Argos Fire* could simply bring over a fire control radar set and digital computer, but the simple fact of the matter was that there would have been no way to connect it to these old mechanical systems, any more than a digital calculator could be connected to a slide rule. The radar could tell these men the exact range, but then they would still have to crank their dials and handles for all these variables to tell the gunnery crews how to elevate, train, and charge their guns.

Renown and *Repulse* had their forward turrets in action while this initial probing was carried out, until on the fifth salvo the watchman called straddle. This prompted the officer to order the aft Y turret in on the next salvo, and the guns rippled out, with each of the three turrets laddering down the range by 200 yard increments from the farthest setting. Five minutes of hot action, with corrections and a speed change, and *Repulse* finally drew first blood with a hit reported on the port side of the target.

Yet the enemy was not idle. The ship that had drawn the angry interest of *Renown* and *Repulse* was the battleship *Richelieu*, one of France's newest designs. As many as 26 personnel teamed to manage her fire control systems, and each turret also had a separate four man team inside on another analog "computer." Their system had a unique feature that displayed a projected future target bearing next to the current plot, and it also incorporated more electrical functions and methods. As all the revisions to existing fire solutions had to be input in the dead zone between salvo fires, the French were literally "thinking ahead" with these future position indicators, and for a good reason. The days of dreadnoughts simply lining up and blasting away at one another were over. The French Navy planned to fight their battles in a roiling, shifting display of maneuver.

Richelieu was a product of this evolution in French Naval thinking, which emphasized speed and maneuver during battle as a primary means of obtaining protection from enemy fire. Everything about the battleship kept that in mind, an evolutionary leap beyond the older battleships from WWI,

many of which were still afloat in the Royal Navy. An up-scaled version of the *Dunkerque* class battlecruiser, *Richelieu* could run at 30 knots, and had all her firepower in two quadruple turrets mounted forward, one above the other. This gave the ship excellent firing arcs needed for a battle plan emphasizing maneuver as an integral part of defending the ship. With a more electromechanical fire control system, the French could feed some data directly to their guns, and the results were going to show the merits of these ideas.

Richelieu concentrated all her fire on the *Repulse*, and though the British had an initial advantage of twelve guns to eight, the French would manage to get five hits against the battlecruiser with her 381mm, 15-inch guns, and six more smaller caliber hits from secondary batteries. In return, *Renown* and *Repulse* were able to put two 15-inch rounds on the enemy, that first shot on the port side armor, and one more serious blow aft, penetrating the thinner armor there and interfering with one of the main propulsion shafts. It would trim six knots off the French battleship's speed, cause moderate flooding, and a fire there would be difficult to control when it began to involve shaft lubricants.

True to tactical doctrine, Captain Marzin now turned away to starboard, content to see that he had beaten *Repulse* to a fiery pulp with those five 15-inch shell hits. Two hits amidships struck away part of her aft stack and destroyed a cluster of five boats on the boat deck there. Another carried away most of the upper works on the aft gun director and smashed one of her triple 4-inch secondary gun turrets directly behind her aft turret. Another penetrated right through her relatively thin side armor, only 152mm at its thickest point compared to the 343mm armor on *Richelieu*. It caused a large internal explosion that compromised 8 boilers, and cut the ship's speed to 19 knots. She was out of the action, turning away before Captain Marzin fired one last salvo at her before yielding the stage to the fleet flagship, which now loomed like a massive shadow coming out of the mist.

In all this action, *Renown* escaped much harm, taking only two secondary hits and one 8-inch round from the French cruiser *Algiere*. It was as if the name of *Repulse* was already inscribed in Fate's register, for she was a ship that was living on borrowed time. The Japanese Navy should have sunk her, along with *Prince of Wales* the previous month in the Pacific. Now she lived on, but was nonetheless paying wergild to Time for that impertinence. If she made it safely to a friendly port, the ship would be

looking at long months of repairs.

Tennant fell off in speed and turned to port, away from the action, but he was pleased to see *Richelieu* do the same. It was the loss of speed at a critical time that had given Captain Marzin pause, and one other thing, the presence of *Normandie* in his wake. This was a foe that overmatched these thin skinned battlecruisers completely, the pride of the French Fleet. That single ship carried as much raw firepower as both battlecruisers combined, and though *Richelieu* had fallen off in speed, her guns could still range on the enemy.

As if in answer, up came *Valiant*, making 23 knots to finally catch up to Tennant's beleaguered battlecruisers, and her eight 15-inch guns would now throw in to try and even the scales. It was just the opening round of a battle that could wreck the heart of three navies that day, and when Admiral Laborde was informed that the German Luftwaffe was coming from the north, he smiled, thinking the day would be his from this point on.

If he was counting on air support to settle the issue, his appraisal of the situation was premature. His gunners, however, would do more than their fair share in the battle ahead, and a distant roll of thunder heralded the onset of the next round.

Part XII

Invincible

*“Between the idea
And the reality,
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow...*

*Between the conception
And the creation,
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.”*

—**T.S. Eliot:** *The Hollow-men*

Chapter 34

Mac Morgan was with Captain Gordon MacRae on the bridge as the action opened. The radar operators had watched the German planes evacuating those two southern airfields, but thus far, nothing had tried to challenge the Royal Navy's daring night raid. Later the Germans would use their *Stukas* in new *Nachtschlachtgruppen*, the 'Night Attack Groups.' To fly successfully at night, they would have to mount special exhaust eliminators, use ultraviolet instrument panel lighting and special sights. New tactics would also be devised, with flares used by designated planes to illuminate targets for the strike assets. None of the required modifications had been made on these planes, and the pilots had little night action training. Yet the coming of dawn, in spite of low clouds from the northwest, would bring the first real threat from the sky.

SAMPSON saw them coming well before they reached the battle zone, and Gordon MacRae decided it was time for *Argos Fire* to stand up the fleet air defense.

"Let's get them well out from the fleet," he said. "Aster 30s, gentlemen, and we won't be stingy. That fleet replenishment ship was a nice catch, so we've topped off our silos."

They had received 20 more Aster-30, and 40 additional Aster-15 missiles, along with 10 of the latest version Harpoons, the RGM-84. Now MacRae would let *Argos Fire* do the work it had originally been designed for, fleet air defense. It was a ship designed to neutralize the threat of modern day enemy air power, and against these slower, 'dumb' targets, it would prove most lethal.

The Germans had been alerted by those night bombardment raids, and the crews at Tan-Tan, and other northern airfields were ready on the planes for a pre-dawn takeoff. I/KG-2 under Major Lerche was flying 38 Do-17s, along with III/LG-1 with 36 Ju-88s under Hauptmann Nietsch. They would be escorted by II/ZG-26 with 24 Bf-109s under Hauptmann von Rettburg. The strike assets were level bombers, with limited facility for naval attack scenarios, but behind them, a second wave of 40 *Stukas* had been reorganized at Tan-Tan in Oberst Bruker's III/StG-2, with another 12 fighters escorting

this group. That was going to put 98 aircraft in the first wave, and 52 in the dive bomber strike wave following, all of 150 planes.

Against this onslaught, *Argos Fire* had a total of 46 Aster-30 missiles that could reach out 120 kilometers, and 98 more Aster-15s with range out to 30 kilometers. So that would pit 150 planes against 144 missiles, but MacRae knew he could not expend his entire SAM inventory here.

"I think it's time we got that launch order off to the RAF," he said to Mac Morgan. "We can thin out the herd, but then we'll need to hold a good missile reserve to cover these carriers."

"Aye sir," said Morgan. "I'll get that order off to signals."

"Mister Dean," said MacRae to his XO. "Use the lamp to say goodbye to our friends for a while, and the ship will come 30 points to starboard and ahead full. Let's get some sea room. We'll open the engagement at 120."

There would be no guessing or wondering in this engagement. Those missiles were each going to find a target, unfailingly, and it was only a matter of how many missiles MacRae wanted to spend here in exchange for German planes. Initially, he hoped the shock value of his first salvos might also have an effect, so he ordered a full third of his Aster-30s in the opening salvo.

One might have wished he could have seen the look on Goring's face when the first reports of that missile fire came in, but the Reichsminister had long since left the theater, and was already back in Berlin. To the pilots who saw them coming, however, shock was not an adequate word. They did everything instinct would command, some diving to look for protective cloud cover, others trying to wheel and evade the deadly rockets, but all to no avail. One after another those missiles found planes, and a single hit was fatal. When it was over there were 135 planes on the radar, and 15 newly listed into the register of fate as KIAs.

Yet it wasn't enough to stop the Germans from coming. The scattered squadrons began to reform, and about 80 kilometers out MacRae decided on a repeat performance, this time with only 10 missiles, which would still leave him 21 of the precious long range lances under his deck. Again, the results were simple math—10 missiles fired, 10 hits, 10 planes gone with all their crews. Yet now it would be up to the lighter Aster-15s.

Of the 98 planes in that first German wave, 73 were still out there. Three then lost their nerve in the rocket trails, and turned back, but 70 more were still coming. They would think the worst was over, flying another 50 kilometers without incident. The Do-17s had lost 18 bombers, but they were

the back of the cupboard as far as Goring was concerned. Production had been halted on the plane the previous year in favor of the better performing JU-88s, but 12 of these had been killed by the Aster-30s as well. This left only 54 bombers alive in those 70 planes, the rest being fighters.

When the next barrage of missiles came, their hot tails scoring the lightning skies, they fell on the remaining formations like a school of predatory piranhas. MacRae authorized two salvoes of 18 missiles each, and the thinning of the herd continued. Yet by the time the survivors actually got over the targets, it was found that they were largely ineffective in a naval strike role. Several near misses were scored on the battlecruisers of Force C, and *Mauritius* took a close shave with extensive shrapnel damage. Yet for all their bluster, the level bombers caused little more than trouble for the fish their bombs disturbed.

Then the *Stukas* came. MacRae did not want to use any more of his Aster-30s, so he fired another 22 Aster-15s against the incoming group, killing six Messerschmitts and 16 of the dive bombers. The RAF was only now arriving over the channel, with seven Spitfires, and four Hurricanes joined by eight Martlets off *Victorious*. *Argos Fire* stood down, turning the air defense of the main surface fleets over to the British pilots.

“We’ve done what we could without pulling all our teeth,” MacRae said to Mac Morgan. “I only hope it was enough.”

In fact, the Germans might have only registered a few more hits had their whole level bomber force come in unscathed. It was the *Stukas* that were to be the problem, for eight of the 40 planes that had started the attack got through, and one of them was being flown by a man named Hans Rudel. When he learned that his mates were in the air from Tan-Tan, he begged Ritter to let him go up.

“Alright,” said Ritter, “but you get me as a wing man. I’ll keep the British off your tail.”

Arriving a little late to the party, they did not have to run the missile gauntlet, and Ritter was too good to allow any of the British fighters to bother his charge. Two Martlets tried to get on Rudel’s tail, and he broke them up by flying right at them, all guns blazing and sending one down in smoke, with the other veering away at the last moment in that deadly game of chicken.

Free to pick his target, Rudel came down on top of the battleship *Valiant*, and put his bomb right on the gun director mast directly behind X turret aft. Up in that director, the men were working in the crowded, armored

space. The Rangetaker was in the center, Gunlayer on his left, hunched forward and peering through the telescope. Directly behind him was the Telephone Talker, who would relay some data verbally to the Gunnery Table below decks. The Control Officer sat directly to his right, and behind him was the another Rangetaker. There were two more seats for Rate Officer and Trainer when needed.

Rudel dropped a 1000 pound bomb. It shattered that station completely, killing everyone there and silencing the stream of information they were feeding to the Gunnery Table below. After that it started a fire on the boat deck, and while not serious enough to prevent the ship from fighting, the hit would weigh heavily in the action that followed. The men around the Mark VII Gunnery Table would have to work a good deal harder with the loss of that gun director data. *Valiant* could still punch, but she was sluggish at it, and often missed the target.

She came on the scene of the battle, seeing *Repulse* trailing thick smoke, and wallowing to port as her speed fell off. *Renown* was still engaging, now shifting her six 15-inch guns to the looming threat posed by the *Normandie*. That threat soon became hard steel in the ensuing duel. With a light rain starting to fall, and reducing visibility, Laborde ordered his ship to close, trusting to the heavy armor that protected him, and knowing the British battlecruisers had thinner hide. With him came the cruiser *Algieri*, and two of the fast destroyers, *Le Fantasque* and *Le Terrible*.

The British would find they were simply overmatched. The opening salvos from *Normandie* found the range quickly, and Laborde put on speed, swinging up and around *Renown* to make it more difficult for the other British battleship to sight him. *Renown* turned with him, and the range closed very quickly to 10,000 meters, where the French gunners really began to do their work. A hit was scored amidships, and then another quickly followed. Already wounded slightly in her scrap with *Richelieu*, the battlecruiser scrambled crews to fight the fires, which soon involved her aft turret to a point where that gun was out of the action at a critical time. The *Normandie* could now pound away with twelve guns to four, and only the two forward turrets of the *Valiant* were in action as that ship came around to get a better angle on the enemy and join the fight.

Seeing the battleship as a more serious threat, Laborde shifted fire to *Valiant*, straddling the British warship on the third salvo. When *Normandie* next fired for effect, the result was awesome. In the probing segment of the

battle, the ships would most often fire two guns at a time to easily spot shellfall and gauge proper bearing, line and range. Once *Normandie* had these in hand, Laborde decided to let loose with a full broadside, though he ripple fired one turret at a time. The result was still going to be twelve heavy 15-inch shells coming at *Valiant*, and three were going to hit, a remarkable score.

The forward A-turret was struck a severe blow, and knocked senseless, the conning tower took the second hit, shuddering behind its 11 inches of armor, but the third hit was above the main armor belt where the thickness reduced from 13 inches to six. It penetrated the ship directly beneath the mainmast where it struck the magazine for the number three 6-inch casemate gun, to cause a severe internal explosion. The concussion blew through two bulkheads, and down another three decks, a hard body punch that had the ship stunned and reeling from the blow. Everyone on the bridge must have been knocked off their feet, for the ship seemed to waver off line, as though no one was at the helm.

Now, with one turret aft compromised by the fire Rudel's bomb started, and the A-turret out of action, *Valiant* was struggling to get back on her feet with B and Y turret, but she did not fire for some time. The French had two more quadruple turrets ready and well aimed before the British ship got off two rounds with B turret. They would be the last to come close to hitting the *Normandie*, because that body punch had also loosened side plating, and water was leaking into the ship at three places. Flooding and fires below decks would soon leave Captain Morgan no choice. He would be forced to flood the magazines for B-turret, which looked to put him right out of the action.

Captain Charles Daniel on the *Renown* saw *Valiant* turn, her guns mostly silent, the ship enveloped in heavy smoke and her speed off to little more than 18 knots. Now he saw the big turrets on the *Normandie* retraining on his own ship, and he knew the thin side armor on the battlecruiser would not protect him. He gave the order 'all ahead full and ten points to starboard,' but *Normandie* was too quick, easily keeping pace as he tried to open the range. The situation was quickly becoming desperate, migrating directly to hopeless when another secondary explosion deep inside *Valiant* opened her sides to the sea. Then *Renown* herself took yet another hit amidships from a 15-inch shell, the flat trajectory piercing her armor low on the waterline.

The next twenty minutes were hell on the sea, as Captain Daniels saw

Valiant list heavily to her port side, her hot fires hissing and steaming as the ship rolled inevitably over. There was a hushed moment on the bridge, and even the French ceased fire momentarily as they realized what was happening. Nearly a thousand men would go into the sea, and the loss of the hero of Gibraltar, hung heavily on any man who saw the ship go down. Now there was only one ship left of the old *Queen Elizabeth* Class, the dour hearted *Warspite*, with Cunningham in the Med. *Barham* and the *Queen* were long gone, and *Malaya* was a wreck in Alexandria, never to sail again as a ship of war.

The pride of France had delivered a knockout blow here, besting not one, but two capital ships of the Royal Navy. Captain Daniels had only one thought now, to put as much sea room between his battlecruiser and that monster out there as possible, but it was not to be. The enemy was simply too fast.

Normandie took up her station abreast at about 6000 yards and had all twelve guns in action against only four on the *Renown*. The French ship would take three hits, one on a secondary battery, and two on her heavy side belt armor, which weathered the blows. In return *Renown* would take 29 hits from various calibers, with 11 of those coming from the bigger 15-inch guns. The battlecruiser was literally beaten to scrap, burned from bow to stern, and soon dead in the water.

More to conserve ammunition than anything else, Laborde ordered cease fire, and sent in *Le Fantasque* and *Le Terrible* to finish her off with torpedoes. The cruiser *Algieri* had chased off the two British destroyers, and so all things considered, this was a decisive win for the French. But it was only part of the massive naval battle now being waged that morning. Elsewhere the cruiser squadron of Force C was having a better time against three French cruisers and a pair of destroyers. The more experienced Royal Navy Captains simply fought their ships better, and they would put the *Dupleix* down for good before the light faded when the sun climbed through the low cloud deck.

The main body of Tovey's Home Fleet had not yet been engaged, but that was now coming to a head. Two more duels would be fought, and Tovey would again face his old nemesis when he saw the contacts reported off his starboard bow were the threatening high silhouettes of the German *Schweregruppe*.

"Sir," came a runner from the W/T Room. "Message from *Kenya* up

ahead. *Valiant* has gone down, keeled right over sir, and we've lost *Renown* as well, dead in the water and burning down to a stub."

"Easy boy," said Tovey, with just a little iron in his tone. "We may have lost those ships, but I'm quite sure that signal said nothing of the kind. In the future, a salute and a hand off on anything you bear from the W/T Room will be sufficient."

"Aye sir... Sorry sir."

"Now then. You are to go to the flag bridge and have them hoist the ship's battle ensign. By God, that's Nelson's flag, and so step lively." Tovey looked for his chief gunnery officer. "Mister Connors!"

"Sir!"

"Kindly pick your target. That big fellow in the number two station looks promising."

"That it does, sir."

Chapter 35

HMS *Invincible* was the flagship of the fleet, but in many ways it was now showing its age. Commissioned in 1922, just two years after the *Hood*, the ship would soon celebrate her twentieth birthday. Estimates of the life span for *Hood* made in 1920 considered that the probable year for scrapping would be 1941, a rather prophetic estimation. In like manner, *Invincible* might have had an appointment at the scrap yards, were it not for the onset of the war, where every ship afloat would be needed.

Tovey loved the ship for its excellent combination of speed, protection and sheer firepower. Fleet men would say it could run like *Hood* and yet punch like *Nelson*, the best of both ship classes. And it was a much tougher ship than *Hood*, with better deck and side armor, and a well protected conning tower with just over 200mm of steel. While *Hood* had an older Fire Control Table from the 1920s, *Invincible* had received the Mark VII when both *Renown* and *Repulse* got theirs. Only the newer *King George V* ships had anything better, the latest Mark IX. While very well protected, that class had a lighter throw weight in 14-inch guns, and *Invincible* was four knots faster.

So all things considered, Tovey was in perhaps the best ship the Royal Navy could put to sea, aging, yet still strong and battle worthy as ever. The ship would now face the best Germany had, and for the second time. She had made a bold rush at *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*, fighting a battle that many thought she might not survive, and fighting it alone. Now, with the company of *King George V* on her wake, Tovey thought the odds had shifted a notch in his direction, but this was to be a much different battle. He was not alone, not desperate, and therefore did not have to resort to the desperate and daring charge he had made the first time these ships met, and the sly use of his forward torpedoes against an opponent who had been born and bred as a torpedo man, Admiral Lütjens.

But Lütjens was dead by then, the victim of an errant shell splinter that blew out his consciousness like a sudden breath of air could extinguish a candle flame. Kapitan Adler was in his place, and the last thing he had ever expected from HMS *Invincible* was a close range torpedo run. Now things were different. Raeder was aboard, a man with even more experience than Lütjens, and Adler had every confidence his fighting Admiral would prevail.

* * *

“Target bearing 320 degrees at 18,400 yards!”

The Gunnery Talkers were already at work on the *Invincible*, sending data to the Rangekeepers in the Fire Control Table Room, which would become turns and half turns on dials, which in turn sent new data on to the gun turrets where the Gun Captain ordered his trainer and elevators to mirror that data as best they could. It was a long human chain, from the eyes, head, and hands of one man to another, a communication moving from mainmast to the guts of the ship, and then back out again to the massive gun turrets.

Starting with the optics that allowed for that sighting, the Germans had an edge with their much wider rangefinder base length of 10.5 meters compared to only 4.6 meters on the British ships. The German optical performance was perhaps a third better, but the British would also utilize additional rangefinders mounted on their gun turrets, instead of relying entirely on the central control of their main gun director station. They would also enjoy a clear advantage with their much better radar sets.

Radar was supposed to bring more certainty to finding that range, but the guns still had to be properly trained and elevated to match what the radar indicated. *Argos Fire* had been jamming all typical bands to blind the enemy, and everyone else, but when the action was to start, Tovey had requested they cease this interference so his ship could have the benefit of that Type 274 Radar. The German FuMO23 could only calculate and send data for proper gun elevation, but the British Type 274 could also calculate bearing. It was therefore about 40% better at feeding useful data to the guns, at least on *King George V*. With her older Fire Control Table, *Invincible* would have more human links in the chain between the first sighting of the enemy and the order to fire, but that order eventually came from Tovey's lips, the single spoken word that opened the action at about 18,000 yards.

“Fire!” came the order, but after it came the lag, the shadow of uncertainty, those shaved halves of seconds that were made up of the sheer time it took for the human brain to process that order, move that finger, and press the trigger. Then there was the mechanical lag in the gun firing interval. With the trigger pressed, the circuit had to complete, the charge had to fire, and the shell had to travel down the long bore of the gun.

T. S. Eliot might have been speaking of this when he wrote: “*Between*

the idea And the reality, Between the motion And the act, Falls the Shadow..." In a modern ship like *Kirov* or the *Argos Fire*, that interval of shadow had been beaten down to the barest fraction of a millisecond. Yet in 1942, that space was a vast gulf that loomed between success and failure in the entire mission all of this machinery was intended for—the bringing of death and destruction to a specific point in space and time.

The specialists at the Admiralty had calculated that darkened interval at somewhere between one quarter to a half second. And in that interval there came the roll of the ship, the movement of the gun firing platform, a change in the wind, a change in target speed or course, a swell in the sea. For every careful calculation intended to guarantee a hit, a hundred other factors arose to try and frustrate that attempt, and impart a further margin of error to deepen that shadow. The gunnery directors would try to compensate with a so called 'forecast' that would account for these discrepancies. It was an assessment made by the Gunlayer, a human assessment made by a human eye: one part judgment, one part experience, one part guessing, and three more parts being the mechanical gauges and optical sights he used to measure everything.

As things evolved, gyroscopes helped to stabilize the Gunlayer's sighting line, and special TIC gear was fitted to automatically calculate the forecast. Those letters stood for Time-Interval Gear, and they were trying to take away that need to make an educated guess, turn it all over to something mechanical, win through to certainty, and eliminate the possibility of error. Yet in every ship, the Gunlayer was still guessing, still hoping he was right, and often betting his life, and the lives of everyone else on his ship and the target in the same breathless moment.

Guess wrong, and your marvelous ship flings a 2 ton shell out into the empty sea, a problem for things swimming there, but little else. Guess right... Chaos. All the hard riveted lines of the opposing ship would be struck by a force intended to obliterate every semblance of order. Chaos. The shell was meant to pierce, penetrate, shatter, explode, immolate anything it struck. It was meant to kill, and almost always did whenever one hit its intended target. There, in that half second when the warhead ignited, anything could happen. And then again, nothing might happen at all, and ships would sometimes come home with a leaden tooth of their enemy harbored in their metal guts, unexploded. But when it did explode.... Chaos reigned supreme.

Tovey was thinking hard about what he now must do to fling that chaos

upon his enemy. I'm well positioned now, he realized. I've got my ships on a good angle relative to the rising sun. They will be silhouetted, and we will be harder to spot. That will only last a few minutes, but it should allow us to test that range call effectively before they can do the same. And the wind is from the northwest. We're running right into it, but the enemy is north, so our turrets will turn to starboard to train on him, and the sea spray won't foul the optics. So there will be no mad rush at them this go round. This time we'll hold the battle line steady and let the guns do the work, and God be with us.

That last invocation was the final element, a call to providence to weigh in on the side of the Royal Navy, though it would go unheeded, for if there was an overweening deity out there that morning, it would not choose sides.

The bright flash from the shadows in the distance told him the enemy was firing now, and it was only a matter of seconds before the first rounds would find the sea. No one ever expected they would find a ship. They were half salvos, meant to see if the initial judgment pronounced by the Range Finders were sound. They were opening expressions of bad intent, steel gauntlets thrown down on the sea, as much bravado as anything else. Tovey's order to fire had shouted, in no uncertain terms, that he was coming to do battle, and bringing chaos in his guns. The enemy reprisal was a chest thumping assurance that violence would be met with equal violence here. It said, in effect, 'bring it on!'

"Long 800!" came the report. "Adjust by twos and ladder down."

Again the big guns fired, reaching steel fingers that spewed those unguided missiles into the morning sky. The muzzle flash had barely cleared before the first tall white pillars of seawater fell near the ship, and remarkably close. It was not a straddle, but it was much closer to that than a miss. The German stereoscopic range finder was very good at fixing opening range, but not so good at following and tracking that range as the battle progressed, which required a highly trained operator. The Germans had also gone to great lengths to improve the efficiency of their range finder, with a special blue coating on lenses and mirrors to improve contrast and brightness, temperature controls, and fans and blowers to keep lenses dry.

Down below, in the turrets, the lifts and grabs were clamping onto those massive shells, moving them to conveyors and traversing trays, and the hydraulic rammers were pushing them from the shell storage room, to the shell handling room where shell bogies would receive them. Scuttles would get them onto the hoists, and up to the gunhouse they would go. The gun was

locked at the proper loading angle, the breech would open, the shell tray tilted to line up with the chamber, and then the shell would be rammed home, with the cordite charges following.

Tons of metal and explosive cordite were being moved by all this precision milled machinery in a matter of seconds, order bringing chaos, which would soon begin inside that long gun barrel when the cordite would explode, creating massive pressure that had only one place it could go—down that long machined steel pipe and out into the grey morning with fire, the bellowing roar of a dragon, and the roll of hot white smoke. All this was accomplished by 25 men in the magazine, 16 men in the cordite handling room, 25 men in the shell storage room, 12 more in the shell handling room, and 10 men in the gunhouse. Admiral Tovey spoke that single word, and these 88 men would see that the order was carried out, and chaos took flight in that 16-inch shell, looking for *Bismarck* that morning, with bad intent.

The massive shell would move half a mile in a single second, and a little over twenty seconds later its journey would be complete as it reached the target zone, some 18,400 yards, or 10.4 miles away. It was as if somebody on the high tower of Big Ben in London had looked due south and spied a distant train rumbling through Croydon, aiming a gun beneath the tower and intending to hit the locomotive spot on, and all by looking, measuring, gauging and guessing where that shell might fall.

The Germans had put their opening salvos very near to HMS *Invincible*, the British shot was well over, and now they would ladder down that range in 200 yard increments, and fire three pairs of two rounds each to see if they could correct that error. The shadow at the heart of that half second, between the desire and the spasm, had become 800 yards wide at the other end of that business, and now it had to be squeezed closer to certainty by an intelligent and highly engineered process of sheer trial and error.

This would go on, over and over, the sweat and sinew of the men, the roar of the guns, the smell of the cordite, the officers standing on the bridge in navy blue, their braided stripes marking their rank and sometimes their skill level as well, their aptitude for using well honed order to produce chaos at sea.

And that is what happened next...

The battle was five minutes old, a straddle for *Invincible* on the *Bismarck*, a near miss on the *King George V* by *Hindenburg*, and then it happened. Chaos struck the high conning tower where Tovey stood, chaos

flung at him by Admiral Raeder and a man named Axel Faust, with all their cohorts. The *Hindenburg* had come out of the mist, joined the hot action, and on her third reaching salvo, the long chain of seeing, measuring, shouting, aiming and firing had come full circle to absolute bedlam.

Yet that chain of causality had begun much earlier than that, with the stealthy approach of a Zombie named Fields, in a British submarine named *Seawolf*. He had put a torpedo into *Hindenburg*, partially flooding the magazine to Anton turret the previous night. The long effort to pump the water out, seal the breach, dispose of the soiled cordite bags, had been considerable, and it was enough to prompt the Gunhouse Captain in Anton turret to take one further precaution. *Hindenburg* had a small upper chamber in the turret that could hold four additional shells for ready ammo. Under normal circumstances, it would not be used, as the danger from an explosion in a hit was greatly magnified.

Yet because of that threat to his main magazine, Axel Faust had decided to park four shells there, so *Hindenburg* was extremely quick with her opening salvos, finding the range with the two that were already loaded in the guns, getting just a little closer with the first two shells from that upper ready ammo, and then scoring that lucky hit with shell number five from that lot, a shell that would not have been at hand to fire so quickly if Fields and *Seawolf* had not come on the scene the previous night. Fate had a clever way of masking her intent, for instead of a liability, that torpedo hit had been the key to *Hindenburg*'s greatest success.

203mm of face hardened British Cemented Steel, eight inches, now stood in the way of death's hand, in the shape of that 1998 pound shell, 16 inches in diameter. It achieved complete penetration, blasting all the way through to send a hail of incandescent hot sparks and shrapnel splinters into the battle bridge, and delivering tremendous shock. All the glass windows shattered, adding to the wild scintillating display as shards flew everywhere.

Tovey had been well to the rear of that armored compartment, and he had just turned and was halfway to the plotting room and flag bridge, where he had meant to check the latest radar signals plot. It was as if someone merely tapped him on his shoulder. Then he was flung forward, knocked right off his feet and down onto the hard metal decking. Groaning with a sudden pain from his left shoulder, he rolled over to see those incandescent hot sparks in the steamy white smoke that now enveloped the bridge, and into his stunned brain a voice was speaking....

The eyes are not here,
There are no eyes here,
In this valley of dying stars,
In this hollow valley,
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms,
death's twilight kingdom,
The hope only
Of empty men....

Between the essence
And the descent,
Falls the Shadow.
For Thine is the Kingdom.

For Thine is...
Life is...
For Thine is the....

Darkness closed in on him, the darkness of the chaos flung at him by his enemies, and his hearing began to fail so that the rollicking noise on the bridge became the hushed murmur of a quiet, voiceless panic.

*This is the way the world ends,
This is the way the world ends,
This is the way the world ends,
Not with a bang but a whimper....*

Chapter 36

Not with a bang... That was the one thing that had saved that station from complete destruction, for the shell had penetrated, but not exploded. *Invincible* had been struck a hard blow on the chin by a vicious agent of disorder, and in that single blow, her jaw was broken, and her eyes blighted with darkness.

The eyes are not here, There are no eyes here, In this valley of dying stars, In this hollow valley...

Nelson's flag still flew proudly on the mainmast, though it bore one more tear from the shrapnel of that hit. As uplifting as the sight of that banner might have been, Nelson was not there on the bridge that day, and now, neither was Admiral Tovey. Everyone on the bridge was knocked senseless, and most were dead. Captain Bennett, sitting in his high chair, now lay slumped to one side, his face and neck red with blood, and one arm missing. The Helmsman was gone, the Executive Officer, and Senior Watch Officer, all dead. There, that broken jaw had become Death's Twilight Kingdom, ruled only by listless shadows, the three men who survived, one crawling on his hands and knees, the other two struggling about on unsteady legs.

It was never supposed to happen this way. It was not what any man hoped. There should have been a raging duel, the hot fire from the turrets roaring in anger, the tall frothing sea breaking on the bow as the ship turned. The mark and fall of shot and shell should have been counted, the hits called out in jubilant voices, the eyes, the hands, the precision milled machinery of death slowly dialing, pivoting, swinging about for vengeance. Through it all, Admiral Tovey was supposed to have matched his wits with those of Raeder, the two old salts head to head at sea, and in the very best ships their nations could float. Tovey was standing beneath Nelson's battle ensign, and Raeder carrying on the legacy of Reinhart Scheer and Franz Hipper.

It should have been shell versus side armor, glory and guts, the sort of thing that had prompted all the men on the ship to call Tovey "Old Splashguts" with his aggressive tactics in battle. It should have been so, but it was not. The bridge was broken, a shattered dream, *'The hope only Of empty men....'*

But there had been two Admirals aboard HMS *Invincible* that day, and through the haze of battle came another man, his stout figure looming

through the smoke, the cap of an officer pulled low on his forehead, his jacket cuffs braided with broad gold stripes. His voice was low and deep when he shouted, and at his side, was Ensign Peter Yelchin, once called Pyotr by his father, a Russian born in Saint Petersburg, who had named his son after that great city. The Ensign had been serving as the voice and ears of the other man, through all those many long conversations with Admiral Tovey.

Admiral Volsky had been another thick bulkhead away, in the plotting room where the signals received from *Argos Fire* were being plotted on the broad position table. The thunderous roar of the hit rattled the table, sending the little wooden ships flying in all directions. He nearly lost his footing, but steadied himself, one hand on the table, eyes squinting with the smoke that was now billowing in through the open hatch.

He fought his way forward, a hand on the shoulder of Ensign Yelchin, and the two men stepped through the hatch and onto the bridge to be the first to bear witness to the carnage there. The stiff sea breeze was gracious enough to slowly clear the smoke, but Volsky could see the hot tongues of fire leaping up across the room. Then he saw the motionless shape of Tovey, and blood there on the deck beside him. He shouted to the Ensign to get hold of the man's legs, and together they slowly dragged the Admiral back through that hatch into the relative safety of the plotting room.

Volsky had Yelchin summon a medical team, and then he turned to him and gave a stiff order. "You are to go now to the signals room, and send this message on every channel. It is but one word—*Geronimo*, understand?"

The man nodded, his face charred by the smoke, sweat on his brow, his hands shaking. "Get to the radio," Volsky said again. "Send that signal, and repeat it until you hear it copied back to you. Now go!"

The Ensign was up and running, and Volsky passed one sad moment looking down at Tovey, whispering a silent prayer that he was still alive. Then, his eyes alight with a sudden realization, he reached into the other man's jacket pocket, finding and taking hold of something there. Then he was up on those thick sea legs, steady on the deck in spite of the wallowing roll that told him the ship was underway without proper steering.

He was through the hatch and onto the shattered bridge, looking for the helmsman station. There he saw the man dead, yet the wheel still there, still intact, for the shell had struck the conning tower on the opposite side of the bridge—and there it sat, unexploded, a vast, menacing shape half way embedded in the buckled deck. Not ten feet away there was a fire, and he

knew that the ship was still in grave danger. That shell could still explode, finishing the job it had started here with the tremendous, penetrating shock of that hit. It lay there, wreathed in smoke, a dull deadly gleam on the hot metal. Its cap had been shattered, and the nose was now buried and out of sight... but if it was still intact... if that warhead charge was still potent...

He saw the metal wheel of the helm moving listlessly back and forth, and took hold of it with his strong firm grip. The three other living shadows of men had staggered away, too dazed to comprehend anything other than the basic instinct to escape. The safe thing to do would have been for him to follow them, and get as far from that deadly unexploded shell as possible, but he could not do that now. Volsky had commanded ships for two decades, always with the power of his voice issuing the orders to set other minds and hands in motion. Yet now, everyone around him was dead, and he was the last solitary impulse of life there in Death's Twilight Kingdom. So he would stand his watch alone, even if it was to be his last, and he would do all in his power to steer HMS *Invincible* to safer water.

In one quick glance through the shattered forward windows, Volsky could see the battle still raging on the sea. He looked to see that *King George V* had come abreast off his starboard side, as if reacting to try and shield the fleet flagship from any further harm. But Volsky did not want to stay there in the shadow of another ship, so he pulled on the wheel, wrenching it to the left, exhilarated to feel the mighty ship beneath him respond to his command. It was as if he were riding a dragon's back, 54,000 tons of snorting steel, belching fire, bleeding smoke from a head wound, but yet still alive with terrible wrath.

He took *Invincible* 15 points to port, seeing from the bow wash that her speed was still good, and after finding sea room there, he came back again, with another turn to starboard. He knew enough English to shout his next order into the voice tube down. "Ahead full! Fire at will!"

The thrum of the ship's engines came in response, and he stood there on that embattled bridge, the wind on his face now, his cheeks soon red with life in the face of all that death, a defiant old warrior standing to in time of greatest need. The minutes that passed seemed like an eternity, and he literally marked the fall of enemy shells ahead of the ship, and steered to try and be elsewhere if they should come again. His instincts told him what he had to do, steer an evasive forward course at the ship's best speed, yet keep a steady enough hand on the tiller so that the guns could train and fire.

Now he stared to see the line of German ships, looming ever closer, all of them running with high creamy bow waves in the mad race of steel on the sea. One ship was faster, out in front now, its long, sleek lines seeming a beautiful thing to Volsky as he watched it. *Invincible* had been slowly edging away from the other German ships, her two knot advantage in speed allowing her to pull ahead. Give me some sea room, thought Volsky, and I will turn and let the gunners have their way with you. But this other ship that had come from behind the high silhouette of the *Hindenburg* was faster, nosing ahead, and preventing him from turning as he might plan.

All the while the guns on either side were blasting away in their deadly calculus of war, and then, when he saw them come, Volsky was almost surprised.

* * *

“Message from HMS *Invincible* sir!”

“Well, you might read it,” said MacRae to his radio man.

“It’s just one word, sir—*Geronimo*. Nothing more.”

MacRae’s eyes narrowed, his arms folded over his broad chest, lips pursed. *Geronimo*, he thought. The word her Ladyship had learned to fear, the name the British had given to that Russian battlecruiser, and God only knew what had happened to it now. It was half a world away, so this wasn’t a salutation from the other ship. No. It was a pre-arranged code word, and one that beckoned him to take immediate action in the heat of an emergency. He had been there in the meeting aboard *Invincible*, there with Tovey, Volsky and Miss Fairchild when they decided the matter. Pick a word, said Tovey, looking about at the others. The Russian Admiral had smiled, and out it came.

“Mister Dean!” said MacRae, with a hardness to his voice that the bridge crew only heard when he went into a fight. “Stand up the *Gealbaums*, all remaining missiles.”

They still had six GB-7s under their forward deck. One had visited the *Kaiser Wilhelm* earlier, and these were the last six. After they were gone, there would only be the ten reserve Harpoons. He might have asked for those, but the GB-7 had a better punch, with a warhead that was 60 kilograms heavier. *Kirov* had missiles with twice the punch, but *Kirov* was not here. It was *Argos Fire* on the watch that day, sheepdog to those three British aircraft

carriers, some 60 kilometers to the south.

“Do we still have a fix on the *Invincible*?”

“Yes sir,” said Dean, “the track is solid.”

“And SAMPSON can see the fellows they’re tangling with?”

“Plain as day, sir.”

“Very well. Salvo of six. Ripple fire. Three second interval.”

Dean turned and relayed the orders to the CIC, and the claxon sounded. At that moment, MacRae looked to see Elena Fairchild come in through the aft hatch to the bridge, curious as to what was happening.

“Signal from Tovey,” he said flatly. “You’ll excuse me, Mum, but I’m throwing the kitchen sink at them this time. It’s *Geronimo*.”

He gave the order, and Fairchild drifted over to his side as the first missile fired. Three seconds later the second was up, and the whole scene was enveloped by the hot white smoke from their tails as the others fired, one after another.

“What has happened?” she said to her Captain, eyes wide with uncertainty.

“That!” MacRae pointed. “Off and away you go, me boyos, and on to your dirty business.” The last missile fired, roaring away from the ship, and they looked to see the six white contrails pierce the low grey deck of clouds and vanish from sight.

On this ship, the shadow between MacRae’s order and the execution of that fire mission was barely there, just the slim half second that lived in the synapse of the CIC Officer’s brain. He heard the order, his hand moved, he punched his ready missile buttons and they were up and on their way.

It was the same half second interval that might have plagued the British battleships, but it did not matter at all. There would be no guessing game here. SAMPSON had painted the targets with its unseen electromagnetic radiation, and their exact position was known to a certainty. And the missiles that fired were not mindless brutes flung out like stones from a catapult. They each had lightning quick computer brains of their own, and a sensor suite that could see, track, and home in on the targets they had been aimed at. They would accelerate to Mach 3, crossing the 60 kilometer gulf between the *Argos Fire* at a speed of about one kilometer per second. It would take them one minute to come on the scene, and what they aimed at, they would unfailingly hit. The shadow was gone, the margin of error banished by the surety of these solid state digital electronics. Death was now a sure and

certain thing, chaos carefully harnessed, and speeding on its way. It was now just a matter of flight time to target.

MacRae looked at his watch. Forty seconds more to go...

"It's about to become a very bad morning for someone out there, he said.

"It's already a bad morning," said Elena.

MacRae nodded. "Aye," he said. "That it is."

* * *

On the bridge of the *Hindenburg*. Admiral Raeder had clenched his fist when the hit was reported high up on the conning tower of the lead enemy battleship. First blood, he thought, not knowing how literal that thought was, that it was the blood of Admiral Tovey, and so many others, that he had now spilled on the cold grey steel.

"That will box their ears," he said to Kapitan Adler with a grin. He saw the lead ship waver off course, and came to believe that blow had been more severe than he thought, but the worst was yet to come. Braving the danger of the hour, he stepped out onto the weather deck to raise his field glasses and peer at the enemy ship. He could see that it wallowed for a time, then turned with a more certain intent, and maneuvered again in a purposeful evasive course. Then he saw something in the sky through a wide clearing in the clouds, and his heart thumped when he realized what he was looking at.

Naval rockets... So they are not being fired from the fleet flagship after all, he thought. His eye was suddenly pulled to the mainmast of his enemy again, where he saw another bright flash and explosion.

"Adler! Was that another hit?"

"No sir," the Kapitan called from the bridge. "We haven't fired again, the guns should be ready soon."

"Bismarck?"

"They are still maneuvering after that opening salvo. I think it may have been a secondary explosion sir. Perhaps it was our last hit, and the shell has finally gone off."

Raeder nodded, his face grim, features set. If that is so, then that ship is no more than a headless horseman now... But those damn rockets will be on us in seconds.

He rushed for the armored protection of the main bridge, ordering the

men there to brace for incoming fire. Nobody could have lived through the explosion he had just seen on the enemy conning tower, and now it was down to fate as to whether his ships would survive the fire coming at them from the sky.

He passed one brief moment, thinking of the other men on the ship his guns had just struck, the sturdy helm of his enemy riven through by his sword. A hard day, he thought. A hard day for us all.

* * *

Admiral Volsky had been there at his post when it happened, bravely steering the ship alone, struggling to do his best to keep *Invincible* in the fight. In his pocket he had back again the one thing that had brought him to this place, the key that Fedorov begged him to carry safely to Admiral Tovey. He did not know what it was for, but when Tovey fell, he considered that it might be safer back in his pocket again in the chaos of that moment.

Once he had dragged Tovey to the Plot Room, and sealed off the hatch for added safety, he took that wheel, alone in Death's Twilight Kingdom, Admiral of the Fleet. He had lost his own ship, but now stood proudly on another, and he was the only man that could save her, in spite of the danger in the wavering light of that fire as it gleamed off the dull metal of that unexploded shell.

Fate had conspired to put it there, just ten or twelve feet away from the Admiral. A man had lived, when he should have died, a Zombie, and now another would take his place. Fate was hungry, jealous, a wayward mistress, and with so many grievances to lay at this man's feet. So she had laid that 16-inch shell there in reprisal, and the heat from the nearby fire was finishing off her sinister work.

There, in that last, tense and wild moment, Volsky felt something in his pocket, an odd warming, and then he was surprised to see a strange green light there. It was the key, silently turning in its own unaccountable way, working its strange magic on the scene, clicking some unseen tumbler in the lock on Time's door. Then Admiral Volsky heard what sounded like a high pressurized whistle emanating from that massive shell, and he looked, his eyes soft, knowing, waiting for the inevitable decree of fate.

In that last fleeing moment, he whispered inside the love he had held so long for his dear wife, for his old ship, and the crew that had so loyally

served him. Well, Mister Fedorov, he thought. Now it will all be up to you.

And that was the way his world ended that day, without the slightest quaver of a whimper, but with a bang that would rage through all time and history. Another English poet named Alfred Lord Tennyson had once written a line that would sum up that terrible swift moment, that brief half second when chaos ended Volsky's life... *'Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change....'*

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Series: Season 3, Book 5

Knight's Move

The Germans would call it *Rosselsprung*, the leaping move of a Knight in a heated game of chess. In the aftermath of the naval duel off the Canary Islands, Admiral Raeder turns loose his surface units to adopt a strategy of commerce raiding as part of his effort to choke British supplies and material bound for Egypt. Surviving the battle largely unscathed, *Kaiser Wilhelm* joins the light escort battle carrier *Goeben* in a daring sortie into the South Atlantic. Still reeling from losses sustained in “Donnerschlag,” the massive battle fought off those islands, the Royal Navy struggles to give chase and engage the German raiders in a harrowing naval saga.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Karpov has taken *Kirov* north to support the opening moves of his own chess game against Japan. He musters his resources to stage an unexpected attack on lower Kamchatka and Sakhalin Islands, his first bid to win back territories lost to Japan long ago in the aftermath of his fateful sortie to 1908. Now the Japanese must finally realize and deal with the substantial threat Karpov poses from the north, dispatching knights of their own to challenge the Siberian in a major alternate history battle.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the Japanese campaigns in the Philippines and Malaya continue, and Operation R is launched against British colonies in New Britain. Halsey realizes he must stand up the U.S. Fleet to defend the Solomons and attempt to isolate the dangerous enemy outpost in the center of his own board, the Ikichi regiment at Noumea.

In Russia, Sergei Kirov struggles to regain control and stop the German onslaught with the long planned Soviet Winter counteroffensive. *Action on three fronts as the **Kirov Saga** moves boldly into the pivotal year of 1942.*

Discover other titles by John Schettler:

Award Winning Science Fiction:

Meridian - Meridian Series - Volume I
Nexus Point - Meridian Series - Volume II
Touchstone - Meridian Series - Volume III
Anvil of Fate - Meridian Series - Volume IV
Golem 7 - Meridian Series - Volume V

*The Meridian series merges with the Kirov Series,
beginning with Book 16, Paradox Hour*

Classic Science Fiction:

Wild Zone - Dharman Series - Volume I
Mother Heart - Dharman Series - Volume II

Historical Fiction:

Taklamakan - Silk Road Series - Volume I
Khan Tengri - Silk Road Series - Volume II

Dream Reaper – Mythic Horror Mystery

Table of Contents

[Part I – Moscow Is Burning](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Part II – Day of Infamy](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Part III – Ultimatum](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Part IV – The Lost Convoy](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Part V – Rooks' Gambit](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Part VI – Wolf in the Fold](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Part VII – Aftermath](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Part VIII – Rain of Fire](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Part IX – Audacity](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Part X – Operation Condor](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Part XI –The Dragon](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Part XII – Invincible](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)