Kirov Saga



Book 28 in the Kirov Series

Lions at Dawn

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler

Kirov Saga:

Lions at Dawn

By

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Lions at Dawn – Volume 28

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Part I – *All Hallows Eve*
Part II – *Operation Phoenix*
Part III – *The Halfback*
Part IV – *Chariots of Fire*
Part V – *Humbugged*
Part VI – *Speed*
Part VII – *Unforgiving Minutes*
Part VIII– *Friends & Enemies*
Part IX – *Saint Michael's Cave*
Part X – *Stalemate*
Part XI – *Lions at Dawn*
Part XII – *The Perfect Moment*

Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

'Tis now the very witching time of night…' A most appropriate quote for the way this volume will begin. We finally came to New Year's Eve, 1942, and entered the critical middle year of the war in the last volume. 1943 was a year where both sides launched bold new offensives, punching and counterpunching in the decisive battles that would eventually decide the course of the war.

We'll begin to see some of these new operations here, many as desperate as they are daring, as both sides attempt to ride the storm tide of war to some favorable end. And true to the general premise of this entire series, we will also see new challengers emerge to threaten the aspirations of all our principal players. Yet now I begin with another twist in the knotted rope of this story that will dramatically complicate the plans being laid by Fedorov and Karpov. It will see this book conclude with another tense six chapter naval duel in the Pacific involving the full range of all the most deadly modern weapons of war. Yet before that happens, there is much more story to relate as the war flares up in the West.

The principle action of this volume will rest in North Africa, as the combined Allied forces in Algeria attempt to push the Germans back into Tunisia, while our Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel, again locks horns with General Richard O'Connor in Tripolitania. Yet Adolf Hitler also gets into the act here, his mercurial mind reaching for new opportunities in the Middle East when the Russian Front is frozen solid in the coldest winter seen in over 200 years. This will lead the Führer to revisit old plans and operations, and dramatic make changes at OKW needed to carry them out.

Just for spice, we will also see two other smaller operations here. One takes place in the Med, in the waters off Tunis and Bizerte, and another will take us to the skies above the Black Sea. There, the Führer's new airships are launched a most surprising mission, as Germany unveils the first of its deadly "Wonder Weapons" of WWII.

- *John Schettler*

Part I

All Hallows Eve

"Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world."

—William Shakespeare

Chapter 1

They moved north with as much stealth as possible. Captain Harada ordered all sensors except passive sonar to go into EMCON mode, as they wanted to be certain there was no chance they might be detected by the Russian battlecruiser. The news of the attack on Truk had not been well received. It underscored just how vast the canvas of the war was, and *Takami* could not be everywhere. Yet even when the ship was on station, they realized they had little real clout as their missile inventory had diminished considerably. The had only 30 SAMs left, enough for one more intervention that would likely just thin out the attacking enemy squadrons. After that, they were no more than well-educated observers in the war, with very good ears and eyes.

The Captain had been flipping through a copy of a magazine that had been found on Fiji by a Japanese soldier and sent up through channels, all the way to Yamamoto, who had then casually passed it to Harada at their last meeting. “I have become somewhat of a monster these days,” the Admiral had said to Harada. “Look at the dour and devious expression they attribute to me.”

It was the cover of Time Magazine, the December 22nd issue, in 1941, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The caption beneath Yamamoto’s caricature read: ‘Japan’s Aggressive Admiral Yamamoto.’ Inside, the cover story set the same tone as the image:

‘A humble wireless set trembled last week with quasi-divine vibrations as the Son of Heaven himself sent Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Imperial Fleets, congratulations for the daring execution of a brilliant treachery.

Congratulations from Emperor Hirohito fix upon their recipient an incredible joy; but also a certain uneasiness. This is because they not only bestow praise; they also adjure the congratulatee to continue the good work —or else.’

Or else… Harada knew the feeling now. They had made their bold approach, entered into this impossible scenario thinking they could make all the difference, yet every success made him feel the weight of that statement.

Keep up the good work—or else you find yourself sent home to Yokohama.

The order to steam for Yokohama took both Harada and his XO Fukada by surprise. They thought that they would be recalled to Rabaul to provide fleet defense there, particularly after the raid on Truk. Instead they were called home, and ordered by Admiral Ugaki to report directly to Fleet Chief Admiral Osami Nagano.

“I don’t like it,” said Harada. “While we were operating down south, we at least had a lid on things. Steaming into Yokohama is going to get a lot of people talking. We’ll undoubtedly have visitors, which is the last thing I want.”

“When poisoned, one might as well swallow the whole plate,” said Fukada. An Englishman might well have said, ‘In for a penny, in for a pound. “You know it was inevitable that we’d draw attention here from the moment we fired that first SM-2 in the bay off Davao.”

“Yet so much for all our grand notions of influencing the course of this war,” said Harada. “We couldn’t persuade Yamamoto, we couldn’t handle the Russians, and now we can’t even protect the *Kido Butai*. We’ve been benched, Number 1, and I’m not immune to the great bane of most Japanese —shame.”

“We’d be wise to limit or prevent any more boardings by men from this era,” said Fukada.

“And what if we get a direct order from someone like Nagano? How does one say no politely to the only man in the Navy senior to Yamamoto?”

“With great caution. We’ll have to be very Japanese about it. Bow and scrape, smile a lot, say the arrangements will be made directly, delay, reschedule, ask for a postponement due to an issue with the ship. You know the drill.”

“That’ll only get us so far. We might delay a few days on a technical matter involving the ship, but not much longer. Perhaps we can say we want to make certain the ship is properly presented to his lordship. And now that we get into royalty, what if the Emperor himself is behind this request? Ugaki was very tight lipped when he gave me these orders.”

“That would certainly be something,” said Fukada, “an audience with Hirohito!”

“Be careful what you wish for,” said Harada. “How do we explain this ship to Nagano? That’s our first real problem. Are we going to tell him the

truth?”

“That would be… difficult,” said Fukada.

“That’s half a word for it,” said Harada. He rubbed the back of his neck, as if he might rub away this whole nightmare, his mind haunted by second thoughts, regrets, and the realization that they were slowly becoming a little fish in a great steaming pot on the boil, and one he knew the end of only too well.”

“XO,” he said. “We’ve gone an hitched our wagon to a falling star,” he said.

“It isn’t over yet,” said Fukada, thinking to bolster the Captain’s spirits. “We still have some fight in us.”

“Not enough,” said Harada. “The Russians called our bluff and we had to back down. Kurita took our shame upon himself, and we’ve gone and made one dangerous enemy of that man. Now it seems that Yamamoto is losing faith in us as well. Mister Ikida, how soon do we make Eniwetok?”

They had initially planned to return to Japan via Manila, but Harada thought that route would expose them to far too many curious eyes, so he requested an alternate route, well out into the Pacific. They would meet with an oiler, and then proceed home.

“Six hours, sir. That was Bikini Atoll on Otani’s screen a few hours ago. We’re due west now and should be at Eniwetok by noon at this speed.”

“Then we fuel up and take a breather. Anyone want to stretch their legs? We’re meeting the *Kazahaya* right off Runit Island. What’s the story on that ship?” He looked at Fukada.

“First in its class, a new oiler laid down in September of 1941. It just launched this month, so this is their maiden voyage. In fact, it’s the only ship in its class, hull 304. Hull 306 was converted to a hybrid Tanker/Carrier. All the others were cancelled. This one was sunk in October of this year by a couple US subs.”

“No use mentioning that when we meet their Captain,” said Harada.

“Agreed,” said Fukada. “Though I think we should have warned Yamamoto about what might happen this April—Operation Vengeance. That was the successful American attack on Yamamoto’s plane in the Solomons.”

“You think that will happen?”

“Who can say? We convinced them to change their code, but the American Intel effort was very good. If they break this one, then they might

get wind of Yamamoto's itinerary in the Solomons."

"Assuming he has one," said Harada, unconvinced. "No, I think the deck is well shuffled here. We might rely on your birth and death stats as the ships are concerned, except for that lot we were screening down south. I never heard of most of those ships."

"Me neither. They were all new," said Fukada. "This war has more than a few surprises."

"Right," said Harada. "Including us."

"Eniwetok…" Fukada was tapping a pad device now. "Yes… This was where the US tested a number of its nukes after the war in the early 1950s. In fact, they popped off nearly 80 detonations here, including Ivy Mike, the very first H-bomb test. That was the biggest detonation in this region, over 15 megatons, and it blew the islet of Elugelab right off the map. It no longer exists in our day, but we can see it here in a few hours. How's that for a good shore leave destination? The island Ivy Mike ate for breakfast in 1952."

The massive Eniwetok Lagoon stretched in a wide circle of coral reefs washed by white foam and pristine aquamarine and cobalt blue seas, about 20 miles wide and 25 miles long. The main island with installations and the principle airfield was in the south, on the eastern edge of the widest entrance to the lagoon. The island Fukada had fingered, Elugelab, was once in the far north, one of many that would vanish over the decades.

During the war, the Japanese navy would make the atoll a busy refueling base, and after they took it, the Americans used it as a forward base to stage hundreds of ships in the lagoon, nearly 500 ships there on any given day by mid-1944.

Takami made its rendezvous with *Kazahaya,* and the crews set about the process of transferring fuel oil. As usual, they could see the crewmen on the oiler gawking at their strange looking ship, but Harada had decided to limit communications to lamp or flag signals, and radio chatter. As they hovered off Runit Island, Fukada was out on the weather deck with his field glasses, searching the northern segment.

"What's got your attention?" asked Harada.

"Just looking for the spot where they built that big concrete dome," said Fukada. "I think it was right there," he pointed. "In 1958 the Cactus ground burst test blasted a 350 foot crater into that spot. The ground was so radioactive that they poured 30 feet of cement over it in a massive dome. You

can see it on Google Earth. It looks just like a big flying saucer sitting on the island. Locals came to call it the eye of the swordfish after they eventually returned. That spit of land was the blade of that fish, and the island its body. The dome looked like a big fisheye."

"Very colorful," said Harada. "Well, we're topped off and ready to move. We'll be escorting that oiler back to Yokohama, but let's go see your phantom island first."

In 2021 it was just a deep blue hole in the sea, two kilometers wide, one of many blasted into the reefs and islands that surrounded the atoll. Now, as *Takami* eased in close, it was a small green islet covered with a lush stand of palm trees. It was hard to believe that the entire island had been completely vaporized by the massive fireball and shock wave of Ivy Mike.

The project had been born as America's answer to the "First Lightning" detonation by the Soviet Union, announcing to the world that the U.S. was no longer the only superpower that possessed these terrible weapons. Decades later, that arms race would make an end of both nations, but no one knew that just then, though they could feel the impending shadow of the event growing in the deepening gloom of relations between Putin's Russia and the West.

It would be a test of two weapons, with big Mike to be the main event, followed two weeks later by a much smaller device, the "King" shot, which would only be 25 times as big as "Fat Man" at Nagasaki. King was a T "Super Oralloy Bomb," abbreviated S.O.B. by the technicians, who came to call it the "Little Son-of-a-Bitch." If it had been dropped on downtown San Francisco, it would have obliterated the heart of the city, killing 225,000 people instantly and injuring over 365,000 more. The thermal radiation from that blast would have covered the entire peninsula, coast to coast, singed the Golden Gate, and burnt the pastoral shores of Sausalito, encompassing all of Treasure Island in the East Bay.

The little King's big brother was much larger. If big Mike had gone off over the financial district in San Francisco, the air blast radius alone would have extended out as far as King's thermal radiation. Everything as far north as San Rafael would burn in the thermal radiation, along with everything to the east, including all of Oakland, Richmond, and the Berkeley Hills. The terrible heat would just be starting to dissipate when it reached Walnut Creek and Pleasant Hill. The fallout from that blast would be heavy over Sacramento, according to prevailing winds, reaching all the way to Reno

Nevada with radiation between 100 and 1000 Rads per hour. 782,000 would have died instantly, and another 650,000 would be severely burned and injured. A weapon like Ivy Mike used in the 21st Century would literally be hell on earth wherever it fell.

One of the first men to know the massive hydrogen bomb had detonated successfully was Edward Teller, at the Berkeley facility in California. The bomb was his brainchild, using a special deuterium fuel within a uranium tamper. It would go off with a one-two punch, a smaller fission bomb exploding in the nose to compress the deuterium and uranium fuel in the body of the bomb. In effect, Teller was using the power of a nuclear fission explosion as his hammer to pound the fuel that would yield a hydrogen explosion. It was this design, perfected by Teller and Stanislaw Ulam, that would be used for most warheads wanting some real clout.

Had it gone off in San Francisco in 1952, Teller would not have survived it at his lab in Berkeley. Instead, it would detonate over that lonely isolated coral atoll in the Pacific, right where Captain Harada and Fukada were admiring the little island it vaporized. On All Hallows Eve, in 1952, it sat there in its 82 ton cylindrical cryostat thermos, called ‘the sausage’ by the technicians, a mindless supercritical mass waiting to live in the fire of that hydrogen explosion. When it went off, it was 500 times more powerful than either Fat Man or Little Boy at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The era of the Thermonuclear Hydrogen bomb had been born. It was October 31st, Halloween night in Berkeley, (07:15 local time on All Souls Day, Nov 1st in the Pacific). Teller’s people picked up the vibration half way across the globe in Berkeley, and he made a cryptic call to an associate seconds after, saying only: “It’s a Boy.”

The witching hour was said to be the time when the borders between this world and other worlds were at their thinnest. Demons and spirits could pass through from one world to another, and that would be very close to the truth.

Chapter 2

Red Flight was up that day, November 1, 1952, and it was led by Lt. Colonel Virgil Meroney, taking three Republic F-84 G "Thunderjet" fighters high into the red dawn, towards the terrible wrath of the world's first hydrogen bomb. The detonation itself had occurred about 90 minutes earlier, and now the massive seething mushroom cloud had ascended to heights well above his plane flight ceiling at 55,000 feet. He and his mates would enter the cloud at 40,000 feet, hoping they would not have any problem with the B-17s.

If any had been close enough to see those planes, they would have thought a ghostly flight of old WWII bombers was lost at sea, wandering aimlessly through time to appear there in 1952. Had they flown close enough, Meroney and his mates would have seen the cockpits were empty, with no sign of any pilot or crew. They were drones, all radio controlled from another piloted B-17 that was guiding them into the great mushroom cloud. Their wings mounted special boxes with filter paper intended to capture tiny radioactive particles from the blast, stuff the world would come to call "fallout." They were harvesting the last remnants of the island Harada and Fukada were staring at from the weather deck of *Takami*.

"Red Flight, Red Flight, this is Convair Control, do you copy. Over."

Meroney toggled his radio and returned. "Roger that, Convair One. This is Red Flight Leader on final approach. Over."

"Roger Red Flight Leader. You are cleared for stem entry. Go with God. Over."

Stem entry…

They were all going to fly right through the stem of the massive mushroom cloud. It towered up and up, over 57,000 feet, a mass of black char and pallid red orange clouds. Meroney had no idea what they would find within that column of doom.

"Red Flight leader to group," he called. "Follow me…"

He looked over and saw his wingman, Captain Bob Hagan, and Captain

Jimmy Robinson just off his wing on the right.

"Lord almighty," came Hagan. *"It's a dark boiling slice of hell on earth."*

"Roger, Red Flight," said Meroney, "Watch your temperature and infrared in there, not to mention that Rad counter. If either one gets too hot, break off and take evasive maneuvers."

Robinson would be the first man to get into trouble. Deep within the mushroom stem, he became disoriented, and then his temperature gauge warned him he was headed right into an inferno. He pulled on the stick, banking away from the heat mass, his plane stalling as he turned too tight, and soon he was plummeting down through the terrible mass of the column.

"I'm spinning out!"

Meroney heard Robinson's distress call, and his was breath heavy as he struggled to regain control of his plane. It was a long tense moment, the Flight Leader listening to his mate struggling to survive, a fallen angel, felled by the power of that bomb. Then, Robinson's voice came back reporting he had regained control at 20,000 feet. Meroney looked over his shoulder, seeing that Hagan was still there off his wing.

"Hold on down there, Jimmy. We're coming down to look for you. Over." He gave Hagan the thumbs up, then banked to begin the descent. Even as he sent that last message, the radio call broke up with static, and he could see his navigational readouts were all messed up. They had been told to expect electromagnetic interference from the bomb, but it was most disorienting when it happened. There they were, lost in that massive red black cloud, unable to see the way out, or read their true compass heading, and unable to speak to one another over the static.

Down at 20,000 feet they were going to eat up a lot more fuel, but there was a tanker down there somewhere, orbiting the stem of that mushroom, if they could find it. Meroney had lost contact with Hagan as they descended, but he was the first to break out in to the clear, having flown right through that mushroom stem. There was suddenly a clear spot in the static, the speaker wash fading out briefly, so Meroney ordered the other two pilots to get out of that cloud mass and head for home. He had decided he would continue to circle, looking for Robinson or that fuel tanker, though he never saw either plane.

A long hour passed, with the Flight Leader nervously watching his fuel

gauge. If he had his wingtip fuel pods on, he wouldn't have had to worry so much, but they had mounted the cloud filter pods there instead, and all he was carrying was radioactive fallout. He imagined it glowing softly within those collection pods at the tip of each wing, not really grasping what radiation truly was.

It wasn't the first time his plane had flown a mission like this. There had been a whole series of tests before Ivy Mike lit up the skies over Eniwetok. The planes would fly through those mushrooms, much smaller than this one. Big Mike was the scariest thing he had ever seen in his life. Yet Meroney's plane should have been towed into a pit, doused with kerosene and set on fire long ago. They would try to decontaminate it after every mission, washing down the wings and fuselage with "gunk" as they called it, but you couldn't get at the insides of the engine. The air intake in the nose would suck in all that fallout as well, and it would be forever lodged within the long fuselage of the plane.

He was flying a radioactive fighter, but Meroney was a very skilled pilot, first learning his chops as a fighter pilot on a P-47. He got nine kills with that plane in Europe, before a lucky flak burst took down his fighter, and he spent the rest of the war as a P.O.W. in Germany.

After the war he served as a Flight Instructor at Luke Field, happy to trade in his P-47 Thunderbolt for the new F-84 Thunderjet. In 1952, he mustered out to Kwajalein Atoll, and now he was out there looking at Ivy Mike. His fuel low, now it was time to head for the field at Eniwetok, but he would later learn that one of his mates, Jimmy Robinson, never made it safely back to Kwajalein. Captain Hagan barely made it himself, coming in dry and flying by the seat of his pants as he glided the plane to a rough landing.

But there was no sign of Robinson. One of the rescue helo pilots said he thought he saw a plane low over the water, its canopy off, as if the pilot was planning to eject. That would have been a hazardous adventure, shooting up out of that lead lined cockpit, wearing that lead vest and a pair of lead lined gloves to help protect him from all that radiation in the mushroom cloud. Hit the water with that vest on, and you would sink like a stone.

But Robinson was never seen again, nor was his plane. If they hit the water off Kwajalein, they did not do so in the year 1952, and no one ever knew where Jimmy ended up—not even Robinson himself…. As for those B-17 drones, they were never seen by anyone again either, at least not anyone

there in 1952.

* * *

“Con—Radar, Contact! Right on top of us!” Lieutenant Ryoko Otani gave Harada a wide eyed look. “It came from out of nowhere!”

“The first thing that entered Harada’s mind was that it was a stealth fighter, but that was just reflex. There were no stealth aircraft flying the skies of 1943. Then he heard it, the drone of heavy engines, very low, a long distended hum. He ran out onto the weather deck and Fukada was spellbound with his field glasses.

“American bombers!” he said. “Where the hell did they come from? They flew right over us. For God’s sake, are we still EMCON?”

“No,” said Harada. “I fired up SPY-1D hours ago, but Otani says they just appeared.”

“She had nothing on them earlier? Hell, we should have seen them half an hour ago.” Fukada was understandably upset. “Has to be a recon mission,” he said. “But from where?”

“Well, they just got an eyeful…” Harada considered what to do. “With me, XO.” He headed for the bridge, seeing the crew there tense and alert. They had been languishing here in a backwaters region of the Pacific, far from any threat.”

“Ensign Shiota—are we still getting static on the comm?”

“Aye sir, but I can’t figure why.”

Both his ladies were hard at work now, each one wearing a bemused expression. If his equipment was in order, there was no way *Takami* could have failed to spot those bombers inbound on their position. What was going on here? Where could they have come from?

“Lieutenant Ikida,” he said sharply. “Look up the range of the American B-17 bomber. I want to know where they could have flown from.”

He looked at Fukada. “Could this be a Doolittle thing?”

“With a B-17? Not possible. No. They had to come from a land base somewhere.”

“Sir,” said Ikida, looking at a map display. “Howland and Baker Islands are about 1400 nautical miles off, Midway is about 1500 and Johnston Atoll about 1660. If they were coming from any of those islands it would have to

be a one way trip. The range on that plane was about 1700 nautical miles."

"We own everything else out here," said Fukada. "This is damn odd."

"Sir," said Otani. "Contact lost. I have nothing on my screen at all now."

Harada turned and walked over to her station. "Nothing? What about targeting radars? Is SPY-1 having a fit?"

"Not from what I can see here, sir. I'm getting all sea level landforms bright and clear. But those bombers are gone. It's as if they just flew through a hole in the sky."

"So they came from out of nowhere, and then just flew through a hole in the sky. Dammit, Otani, run a full diagnostic on that system—right now."

"Aye sir." She gave him a sheepish look.

Harada listened… The sound was gone. He stepped outside onto the weather deck again, squinting at the sky, but could see nothing. Then it happened, the faint shudder, a tremulous vibration that clearly shook his ship. The pulse of alarm quickened within him, and all he could think of was a torpedo, or an unseen bomb, his head looking forward and aft for any sign of an explosion. All was in order.

He heard a sound, low and deep, like some dark beast growling at him from the edge of the distant horizon. It filled him with an unaccountable feeling of dread, and he backed slowly through the open hatch, seeking the relative safety of the bridge again. Everyone else could hear it, their faces wearing blank expressions, eyes searching, heads inclined, listening. Fukada looked at him, for the last time they had heard anything remotely like that sound was the moment they had shifted here, the moment that damn volcano had gone off in 1942, creating a hole in time so vast that it had literally sucked the ship and crew into the past.

It was not Krakatoa they were listening to now, but a monster made by men like Edward Teller and Stanislaw Ulam. They were listening to Ivy Mike. Its sound was so deep and penetrating that it rolled back upon them like the thunder from an unseen storm, nine long years into the past, rumbling over the lagoon. They were drifting there in the stillness of 1943, no more than a kilometer from Elugelab island, which was ground zero on All Hallows Eve in 1952.

Ivy Mike was shaking all the days and weeks between that moment and the instant it burst into fiery life, but the hole it was opening in time would stretch both directions, to the future as well as the past….

* * *

The situation in 2021 had gone from bad to worse, nine days of increasing tensions that deepened to open hostilities on both land and sea. An oil tanker had been targeted by terrorists in the Straits of Hormuz, a ship owned by one Fairchild Incorporated. US Marines had landed on Abu Musa Island in reprisal, and there had been another serious incident in the Gulf of Mexico. The massive Thunderhorse platform had been battered by the raging fury of a hurricane, but its demise was hastened by a torpedo off the Russian submarine *Tigr*, and that sub was then attacked by US forces and destroyed.

The Red banner Fleet had sortied from both Severomorsk and Vladivostok, the latter led by the flagship of the fleet, the mighty *Kirov* under Captain Vladimir Karpov. There had already been naval skirmishes near the Diaoyutai / Senkaku Islands, as China and Japan tussled over those uninhabited rocks like dogs fighting for a bone. The Russians had moved out of the Sea of Okhotsk to make a show of force, where they encountered a Carrier Battlegroup from the US 7th Fleet under Captain Tanner. Sparks flew soon after a heated discussion between Karpov and Tanner, and then the planes and missiles flew after them.

There in the midst of that terrible action, the Demon Volcano had rumbled to life, even as China sent its most advanced new missiles and planes in wave after wave against her wayward son, Taiwan. Ships and aircraft were moving on every side, but when *Kirov* and two other Russian ships suddenly disappeared near the site of that volcano, it created a mystery that would haunt the decades past.

Kirov and Karpov had already wounded their enemy, CV *Washington*, but the Americans believed that they had sunk the Russian battlegroup. Now they were moving to rapidly reinforce their Pacific allies, with forces mustering at Guam, including strategic bomber groups that would soon be aimed at China.

One of those replenishment operations was the transfer of fighter aircraft meant to reinforce the Japanese Navy. Japan now saw her position becoming more and more uncertain as the war began to escalate. Her first line of defense was the small yet highly professional Navy she fielded, and like her ancestors in the Second World War, there was a layer of shadow that masked some of the potential combat power of that fleet.

The modern Japanese Navy had a number of small helicopter carriers in

the early 21st Century, some with famous names. There were three small *Osumi* Class amphibious Assault ships at 14,000 tons, with deck space for eight helicopters and a pair of fast hydrofoil landing craft. Next came the *Hyuga* class, two ships named after the venerable old battleships *Hyuga* and *Ise*, but they were 19,000 ton Helicopter Destroyers instead, and capable of carrying 18 helos. Finally the next evolution of this line came with the commissioning of the full-fledged helicopter carrier *Izumo*, which could carry 28 aircraft. Officially, those aircraft were to be helicopters, but at 27,000 tons, *Izumo* had the size and stability to carry jet fighters as well, and by 2021 she had two sister ships with wizened and honorable names—*Kaga*, launched in the year 2017, and *Akagi* joining the fleet in 2020.

Their deck coatings had been specially modified to resist high temperatures, and the elevators adjusted to receive some very special guests, the F-35B Lightning II strike fighter. *Akagi* already had good experience with fighter operations, and it had been a part of the skirmish with the Chinese days ago before being ordered to transfer all aircraft to the *Izumo* to clear her decks, and make this secret rendezvous.

So Japan was pulling a little sleight of hand here again, just as it had done in the last war with the Shadow Fleet. It had carriers posing as helicopter destroyers, and now, all Japan needed were the planes the Americans were sending them.

Both ships were out to sea that day, forming the heart of an eight ship task force that consisted of the carriers *Akagi* and *Kaga*, with the Aegis Class Destroyer *Atago*, the first ship in the class that had given rise to Captain Harada's *Takami*. Two older guided missile destroyers, again with famous names, *Kongo* and *Kirishima*, were nearly as powerful as *Takami*, with 90 VLS cells each.

They were joined by another of Japan's newest destroyers, DD-120 the *Takao*, which was the second ship in the new *Asahi* Class. While not as powerful as the DDG class ships, it was a very capable close escort for the carriers, with 32 VLS cells firing a mix of Evolved Sea Sparrows and the RUM-139 ASROCs against subs.

The big 25,000 ton oiler and fleet replenishment ship *Omi* was also in attendance, for they were going a long way from home waters, and that ship was escorted by the last member of the group, the smaller 7,500 ton helicopter destroyer *Kurama*. That ship was included to buck up ASW

defense, because the two larger carriers had gone to sea deliberately light, with just six helos each.

There was a reason for that. *Akagi* and *Kaga* had just made a secret rendezvous with a US carrier task force out of Pearl Harbor the previous day, and there they received a gift from the United States, two squadrons of the planes that would make all the difference, transforming the carriers from stolid though capable caterpillars to soaring tiger moths.

The fighter that would convert those ships to light strike and air defense carriers worth the name was the Lockheed Martin F-35B combat jet, and the US had flown in 18 Lightning IIs, nine for each of the two carriers. They were all planes that had been purchased by Japan in prior years and this was a perfectly good time to deliver on that contract, for the US would simply be bolstering a Pacific ally, and increasing overall capability in the region. The ships were also big enough to carry the USMV-22 Ospreys to allow for expanded amphibious and strike warfare missions—and they would get two of those each.

So there was a good chunk of the Japanese Maritime Naval Defense Force out to sea that day, designated the *Kaijō Jieitai*. They had met the Americans at a very convenient half way point between Japan and Pearl Harbor, not the island of Midway, as it was thought that would revive memories of old wounds. Instead they chose an otherwise humdrum atoll in the midst of the Pacific, a former wartime base that had been used by both sides, Eniwetok.

Chapter 3

Vice Admiral Kita was now satisfied that his nation would have all the capability it would need to return to the home waters and provide for maritime security. Unfortunately, he would never get there. His line of fate would now become entangled with the fate of one of his wayward Captains, and a ship that had been reported lost the previous day in the Sunda Strait. The Americans would have everything to do with his dilemma, for the same hand that had empowered him, would soon be raised against him, albeit in another era, another world, as he would soon come to surmise.

It had been all Hallows Eve, the 31st of October, 2021 when they heard the low rumble emanating from the sea. His task force had completed the rendezvous, receiving the much coveted F-35 strike fighters the previous day, and the American were now far to the south, bound for Guam. Before the war, he had little use for them, believing that it was high time for Japan to come out from behind the protective skirts of the US 7th Fleet. They Americans were, in his mind, a useful annoyance, though he could not fault their equipment and technology. Here they would offer Japan things that Toyota and Honda could not build, though the inverse was also true, as Japanese cards had dominated the freeways of the us for decades.

Kita had lingered just north of Eniwetok, completing refueling operations for his smaller destroyers before beginning the journey home. The real crisis point was now Taiwan, and the Americans were massing their carrier power to challenge the Chinese there. The Russian fleet was no longer deemed a threat, though there had been yet another incident involving a Russian Submarine in the Sea of Japan. It was engaged, and believe destroyed, though no one could be certain of that.

After the Senkaku incident, both *Akagi* and *Kirishima* were rushed to join his task force bound for Eniwetok. Now he was ready to take those precious F-35’s home, but Ivy Mike had other plans for him that day. There would only be one consolation for the fate that befell him, and that would be the unexpected reunion with a ship the Navy had believed lost, one of their newest and best, DDG-180, the *Takami*.

* * *

Otani could not believe her eyes. She had been feverishly running her diagnostic routines, testing each panel of the SPY-1D system in, and then running full integrated four panel tests to verify all was in order. She had no fault readings of any kind, and could not surmise what could have gone wrong—until it happened again. Contacts—this time on the surface, and very close!

"Con—Radar. Surface contact, bearing true north. Range…. Just 3000 meters!"

"What?" Harada did not have to ask her what in the world she was talking about. All he had to do was turn his head and look. At that same moment, Lieutenant Commander Fukada came rushing in from the weather deck.

"Captain! Ships off the starboard bow! They're flying our colors."

"Damnit, Otani. I thought I told you to run a full diagnostic."

"I did, sir. Just completed it. I have no fault readings at all. My screen was clear, and then…"

"What's out there, Fukada?"

His XO simply smiled. "Come have a look for yourself. They're ours, all of them. Look there, that's big fat *Omi* on fleet replenishment. And those have to be two *Izumo* class carriers! There's our sister ship, *Atago!"* He gave Harada an elated look. "We're home!"

Harada was standing dumfounded, hands on his hips, his mind almost unwilling to believe what his eyes were telling him. Yet the distinctive lines of the ships were unmistakable. It was the *Akagi*, and undoubtedly her sister ship *Kaga*, but what in the world were they doing out here? Was Fukada correct? Did they shift again? Were they home at long last?

Now the trembling vibration he had felt came to mind, the ominous low rumble that had everyone on the bridge on edge. It was much akin to the same sound they had heard when they made that impossible shift to the past. It must have happened again—who knew why—but they were home. There could be no other explanation.

Then he looked over his shoulder, thinking to see other friendly ships about, but what he saw instead stole away all his joy. There, sitting it the serene silence of the Pacific, its white shores washed by gentle surf, was the island of Elugelab.

“Number one….”

Fukada turned his way, still grinning widely.

“Are you certain about that story you told me?”

“Sir? What story?”

“About that big American H-Bomb.”

“Of course. What of it?”

“Well isn’t that the island you said the damn thing vaporized?”

Now Fukada stood and stared himself. There it was, Elugelab, but that simply could not be. That island was destroyed, pulverized, blown off the face of the earth by Ivy Mike. If they were home, then all they should be seeing there now was a deep blue hole in the sea. He looked left and right, thinking the ship must have drifted, but the familiar landforms he had seen earlier were still there, and so was Elugelab.

“But sir,” he said haltingly. “This can’t be correct. If that’s Eugelab, then __”

“Then we haven’t moved after all,” said Harada. “We haven’t moved at all and it’s still 1943. Where’s the *Kazahaya?”*

“There, sir.” Fukada pointed off their bow, where the WWII Oiler was still holding position at anchor near the edge of the lagoon.

“By all gods and kami,” said Harada. “If we haven’t moved, and those ships are real…”

“They came to us!” Fukada’s eyes were wide now. “Sir, maybe they found a way to get through to us. Who knows how? Maybe this is a rescue mission.”

It wasn’t, as Admiral Kita was soon to find out aboard the Kaga.

“Admiral, sir, we have two contacts off the port side of the ship. They just appeared on radar.” Chief of the Watch, Kenji Omani, pointed out the ships he was seeing, and Admiral Kita squinted, clearly unhappy.

“Contacts? That looks like *Atago* is out of position. What are they doing over there?”

“No sir. There’s *Atago*, maintaining station abeam of *Akagi*, just as she should be.”

“Con—we have a secure radio transmission, and the ship ID is DDG -180. It’s *Takami!*”

Admiral Kita was a no nonsense, professional officer, young at just 45 years to have the position he now held, but already graying at the temples. He

was a rising star in the new Japanese Navy, the *Kaijō Jieitai*, and one who had seen the coming of this war with China as inevitable. When *Takami* was reported missing on her return voyage from those exercises with the Australians, he strongly suspected that she had been ambushed and killed by a submarine, though even after an extensive maritime search by units of the Australian and Indonesian fleets, not a single trace of the ship had been found.

Then events had made it impossible to prosecute that search further. China was firing missiles at Taiwan, and it would only be a matter of days before they aimed them at Japan. The "incident" off the Senkaku Islands had confirmed his worst suspicions. A Chinese Submarine had fired on the light frigate *Oyoko*, and one of the ships here with him today had settled the score, the missile destroyer *Kirishima*, commanded by Captain Kenji Namura. He had destroyed the Chinese sub, which was later identified as the *Li Zhu*.

Then the Chinese planes had come seeking vengeance, and his equally capable carrier Captain, Shoji Yoshida, had launched fighters from the decks of *Akagi*, the first group of F-35Bs ever to fly a real combat sortie for Japan. The Chinese air force had learned they were not quite a match for the Silent Eagles and hidden Lightning in the sky that day, though their reprisal sent the dread Dongfeng missiles into the sky to strike Naha airfield on Okinawa. It had been a limited but pointed attack, the first time a foreign nation had delivered ordnance against the Japanese homeland soil since WWII. Yet this was nothing compared to the escalating conflict with the United States.

China had taken out an American spy satellite with lasers. The US retaliated with hypersonic missiles on the launch sites, an attack that had penetrated deeply into the Chinese mainland. The Great Red Dragon then took the unprecedented step of launching a missile over the west coast of the US, initiating an EMP attack that caused widespread disruption of the electrical system. While the real damage was not as serious as first believed, it struck a chilling note in the dark symphony that was now playing on the world stage. The weapons of this third war were more potent that anything mankind had ever seen. When the Americans had tested Ivy Mike, even as early as All Hallows Eve of 1952, they released more raw killing power than all the bombs and shells fired throughout the entire Second World War.

And Ivy Mike had done one more amazing thing—it had sent Admiral Kita and his entire task force into the hole it time it had opened, a tunnel

boring into the past even as it reached into the distant future. Kita's ships just happened to be in exactly the right place, at exactly the right time, and something in the gravity exerted by one of their kinsman, JS *Takami*, pulled them inexorably back in time to the year 1943.

The hour, day and year they would soon find themselves in would shock Admiral Kita to the core. There was *Takami*, looking well and alive, and the first thought that hit Kita's mind was that the ship had been assigned some top secret assignment, and that had been the real reason for its disappearance. Now it had obviously been ordered to make this rendezvous, but he would soon find out that the real truth of this situation was even stranger than he could possibly imagine.

* * *

"Sir, we've confirmed there is no equipment malfunction on our end. I have reports from *Kongo*, *Kirishima* and *Atago*, and all their equipment checks out. The problem has to be upstairs." Lieutenant Hayata eyed the ceiling, but he was meaning to look well beyond it, beyond the atmosphere in fact, where the satellites they would communicate with would be making their silent orbits. "We've lost all command level links, sir—GPS is down too." He handed the Admiral a status board, which Kita eyed briefly before nodding.

Two ships had just appeared, seemingly out of thin air. One he knew and their own long lost destroyer, *Takami*, the other was as yet a mystery. At that moment, Captain Harada walked in through the main hatch to the bridge, saluting, and that mystery would soon become sheer madness. Fukada followed him like a shadow, for the two were the heart of all that had happened here, and the only men really responsible.

Kita looked them over, then extended a hand to the Captain. "You've been missed," he said with a warm smile. "And I hope you have some news for me about all that."

"Yes sir," said Harada. "Might we meet in your stateroom?"

"Very well."

They were meeting aboard the task force flagship, *Kaga*, and as they walked, the Admiral gave them a running briefing of their situation. "Strange," he said, "but we've lost all comm-links with Yokohama. Can't

reach Sasebo either, and all our satellite connections are down—GPS, the works. How are your links?"

"The same," said Harada.

"I don't like it," said Kita. "Things have been pretty wild the last few days, particularly after that tit-for-tat between China and the US. I can see how we might lose some of these links in an emergency, but all of them? We can't raise anyone in Japan—Kure, Maizuru, Ominato—silent as mice."

Fukada was exhilarated with what had happened. Yet now he realized the difficulty of what they had to do here. In truth, even they did not really know what had happened, but there was *Kaga*, and here was Kita, a man both these officers knew well, and respected.

"Alright Captain, what were your orders? No one told us to expect company. Where were you—lurking in a bank off fog out here somewhere? You just appeared on our screens a moment ago, and that's damn strange. For that matter, what's that other ship at anchor out there?"

"Sir," said Harada. "I'm afraid we've quite a tale to tell here. As you know, we were returning from that joint operation with the Australians, and had just passed through the Sunda Strait…"

* * *

"1943?" The Vice Admiral looked at Captain Harada, somewhat aghast that an officer of his experience and maturity would even suggest such a nonsensical thing. "This is no time for levity, Captain. The silence on all our comm-links is deafening. The homeland could be under attack at this minute."

"Sir," said Fukada, "I can assure you, the homeland is safe here at the moment, at least for the time being. I know that what we've told you sounds fantastic, but you can have your navigator confirm all that sun and moon data Commander Fukada mentioned, and you'll soon see that this isn't October. It is in fact, January, and when he's done with that, here's a chart of what these islands off our port side should look like here. One look out that port hole will tell you something is amiss. That's the island of Elugelab out there."

"What of it?"

"Sir, that island won't be on any of our charts. It was vaporized in 1952 during an American nuclear bomb test here. It no longer exists, but yet, there

it is. Your Navigator will confirm that as well."

"Now you can't stand there and tell me this task force has sailed off into Yomi." The Admiral gave Fukada a hard look. "I want some answers here, and enough with the nonsense."

Yomi was the mythical Land of the Dead, the world of darkness in Japanese Shinto mythology, and Fukada passed a moment thinking how they were going to explain that the life and world the Admiral came from were gone, at least for now, if not forever. They had hoped the Admiral's task force was a rescue mission, as farfetched as even that seemed. How could Kita simply lead his ships into the past to make this timely rendezvous with *Takami*. By what means would he have done so? Yet there he was, unaccountable, as much a surprise to Harada and Fukada as they were to him.

"Admiral," said Harada. "This is going to get worse before it gets better, and it's going to take some time. My XO is correct. That is Elugelab out there, and there's your first clue as to the truth of what we've just told you. The sun and moon data will back it up. You won't raise anyone on normal comm-links here, but have your radioman tune in to a set of frequencies we'll give you today. For that matter, just start monitoring the AM or FM bands. You'll start picking up what you could only call 'yesterday's news.' And right out there," he pointed, "That's the fleet oiler *Kazahaya.* We just took on fuel and we were about to escort it home to Yokohama."

"Kazahaya? Never heard of it."

"Of course, sir, because that ship was laid down in September of 1941… and it was sunk by a pair of US submarines in October of 1943. There it is. Board it. Go yourself with a detail of Marines. We'd be happy to accompany you, and when we're done, send a helo up and overfly the main airfield at Eniwetok. There was a 6,800 foot bomber field built there by the Americans in 1944. You won't find it there now, just a small airstrip. There isn't much there at all now, just a small seaplane base on Parry Island. Go have a look, and on the way there, check our Runit Island. Look for the Fish Eye, and you'll see that's gone too. That ground is still radioactive in our time, but not now. It's pristine. You won't find the slightest hint of radiation anywhere in the atoll, and this place was hit with over eighty detonations after the war. It's going to be a case of seeing is believing for you over the next few days, just as it was for us. But everything you see and hear—everything—is going to back up what we've just told you."

Part II

Operation Phoenix

"Up then, fair phoenix… Be thou a new star, that to us portends
Ends of much wonder; and be thou those ends."

—John Donne

Chapter 4

General Dwight D. Eisenhower sat at the head of the table, looking down the line of personalities on either side. The British were there with Air Marshal William Welsh, a quiet yet competent man who had started in the Merchant Navy in 1910 before becoming a test pilot in the first war. Then he worked through various positions in the Middle East, leading Air Squadrons in Palestine and Syria, managing technical training and air supply operations. At his side was Middle East Theater Commander Wavell, one eye shielded with a patch, looking just a little more grey, and very worn. He had stayed at his post largely because of his secret knowledge of *Kirov*, Kinlan, and the true origin of both, though Churchill had seen that he was flush with a number of able subordinates now, like Auchinleck and Alexander.

On his left sat the implacable and stolid figure of General Montgomery, Britain's Rock, both east and west, always happy to wear such a moniker on his small round shoulders. Today, however, he appeared as a no-nonsense soldier, dressed in plain khaki kit with the telltale beret sitting on the table before him. Monty had been very busy, carefully managing the transfer of British forces from Spain, and receiving new units, equipment and supplies through the ports of Oran and Algiers. He glanced occasionally at Patton, who sat opposite him on the American side of the table, an amiable grin on his face in spite of his impatience to get on with this war. General Omar Bradley, sat on Patton's left, another quiet and unassuming man that Eisenhower had cleverly sent to Patton to keep an eye on things. The colorful Brigadier General James Doolittle, Senior USAAF commander, rounded out the American delegation.

"Alright," said Eisenhower. "We've sat on things here long enough. It's taken us the better part of three months just to sort out the logistics here. Thus far, I would have to say that our operations in Algeria have violated every recognized principle of war, are in conflict with all operational and logistical methods laid down in textbooks, and will be condemned in their entirety by all Leavenworth and War College classes for the next twenty-five years! That stops now. This meeting is to coordinate the new offensive, and I'm told they

picked a doozy of a name for it this time—BLADERUNNER."

There had been an advanced combined arms team called "Blade Force" composed of both British and American troops early on as the Allies pushed into Algeria, and the name had sprung from that.

"Operation Torch succeeded in spite of the logistical mess," said Ike. "We cleared Morocco, chased the Germans out of Spain, liberated Gibraltar, and pushed half way across Algeria before they dug in their heels and stopped us. They wouldn't have stopped us if we had been able to move faster, but now we meet to address that shortcoming. At the same time, General's Wavell and O'Connor cleared all of Cyrenaica and now they're ready to push on for Tripoli. That's his operation out east. For us here in Algeria, the aim is Tunis and Bizerte, and complete control of North Africa. But General Wavell, what in God's name happened at Tobruk?"

Wavell had expected the question, asked more for the benefit of other officers who had heard more rumors about it than explanations. He cleared his throat, smiled, and gave the stock reply that had been devised by the British to cover the debacle.

"That was our forward supply depot for General O'Connor's entire operation while the Italians still had Benghazi," he said. "We had fuel and ammo ships packed in like sardines on the south side of the harbor, and something ignited an ammo ship. That shore was also crowded with munitions ready for movement to the railhead. I'm afraid it was too much together at one time and place and the whole lot went up in the most spectacular mess anyone's ever seen."

Ike nodded. That was the gist of it, and he hoped it would now stop lips flapping about it so they could get on with things here. What he really knew about it, he would keep to himself, and it was a good deal more mysterious than Wavell's straightforward story.

"Now that we've got Benghazi," said Wavell, "we won't have all our eggs in one basket like that again. Heaven forbid."

"Very well," said Eisenhower. "Gentlemen, here's what's at stake as we look at BLADERUNNER. First off, if we do this right, the enemy is looking at the complete loss of all his forces in North Africa—either that or he'll simply have to pull them out. Beyond that, when General O'Connor is through with him, we'll have all of Tripolitania in hand and maintain an occupation of all the former French and Italian colonies in Africa. That gives

us a perfect base to stage a landing on Sicily and get started on the effort to knock Italy right out of the war. Beyond that, we'll have fertile ground here to recruit new troops into the Free French Army, and I expect we can establish an entire Corps here when we're done. There are some very good airfields on Sicily, and with Crete still under British control, we can then move heavy bombers to those islands to begin a concerted bombing campaign aimed at southern Germany by mid-year. And of course, once we have Sicily, we can move from there to either Italy or Southern France." Always diplomatic, Eisenhower had thrown bones to the British 8th Army in the east, both air commanders, and the Free French, even though they had no representative present.

"Now," he continued. "First things first. I know Generals Montgomery and Patton are eager to get started, but I wanted General Doolittle and Air Marshal Welsh here for a very good reason. The plain fact of the matter is this. If we're to advance on either side of this operation, the air force must lead the way. We've simply got to establish air superiority at both ends."

"Damn right," said Patton, an aggrieved look on his face. "The Krauts took after me the other day and ran my ass into a ditch!"

"Well they must have seen that third star you've got on that jeep, George," said Bradley with a smile, and there was a restrained chuckle all around the table.

"The point is," said Patton, "we need better tactical coordination from the ground up. When our troops call for air support, I want it thick and hot. None of this shillyshallying about with the planes arriving 24 hours later."

That set Welsh to shifting uncomfortably in his seat, but Doolittle only inclined his head in Patton's direction. He had already spoken privately with Eisenhower about this topic, and he knew what was coming.

"Well and good, George," said Eisenhower. "Support for the troops on the ground is part of it, but I disagree with that ground up approach. I want the air arms operating independently. Yes, we'll have liaisons and ground officers working on the front lines, but they'll be there to coordinate, not control. I want overall control of the air forces to remain right with the tactical officers who are best at that job. That would be Tedder, Coningham, and I'm bringing in a good man on our side as well, General Carl Spaatz. We call him 'Tooey,' and he knows his game. The way I see it, and both Welsh and Spaatz agree, is that we need to focus on a more strategic application of

our air power, and not simply see it as a tactical support for the Army. Don't worry George, you'll get the support you need, but I want the real emphasis to be on overall air superiority operations and interdiction, not ground support."

"General Spaatz is a good man," said Welsh. "He's been in the UK since 1940, and I daresay he's well thought of by everyone there. He's of the opinion that 8th Air Force in the UK could help us out a good deal by transferring bombers to overall command of ANAA." He pronounced that 'Anna,' which was short for the Allied Northwest African Air Force. "I can't underscore the importance of using them heavily in the interdiction effort, and applaud the concept of keeping the reins with the air force commanders. No offense, General Patton, but we can't be Johnny on the spot everywhere. The situation on the ground changes a good deal hour by hour, yet if we do seize control of the airspace above your battlefield, the likelihood that you'll have to get after German Heinkels with your pistol will diminish considerably." Everyone laughed at that again, for they had heard that Patton did exactly that, standing his ground defiantly with a pistol in hand during a German strafing attack.

"So I don't want a regimental Colonel out there thinking he's got his own private air force just because we post an air liaison with his HQ." Eisenhower underlined his point.

"The trouble we've had to date," said Doolittle, "is keeping fighter squadron strength up. Joe Cannon has done a good job at Casablanca setting up machine shops for repairs, but we'll need to move those forward into Algeria."

"I spoke to him recently," said Patton. "Hell of a good man. He says we took some decent fields as the Army advanced, but only three are any good for all weather operations."

"Correct," said Doolittle. "That would be Port Lyautey at Kenitra on the Atlantic coast, Tafaraoni south of Oran, and Maison Blanche just east of Algiers. If we could take Bone, we'd get another good field there. Aside from that, we've a lot of reserve fields being thrown together with PSP reinforcement." That stood for Pierced Steel Planking, which had arrived from the states in abundance as part of the engineering effort required to operate in this terrain. The steel planks provided a sturdy under-bed to prevent the secondary fields from becoming unusable mud holes in the heavy

January rains.

"The problem," said Welsh, "is that all but one of those fields are behind the action now. The field at Port Lyautey is 700 miles to the rear, and not good for much of anything. That gives us the two fields at Oran and Algiers, the former being just over 300 miles behind the front. That will do for the bombers, but not the fighters. They'll have to fly from Maison Blanche, or the smaller secondary sites. That field gives us a little edge over the battlefield just now, as the good German fields around Tunis and Bizerte are 250 miles east of the front. Yet if we advance as planned, their air situation will get better, and we'll push farther and farther from Algiers."

"Then we'll need the field at Bone," said Montgomery. "Perhaps we can use a combination of para units and Royal Marines to take it at an opportune time."

"I like that," said Patton. "Audacity. Keep the other fella on his toes. I've also got my eye on Tebessa near the Tunisian Border. There's a good field down there at Les Bains."

"Both are on our objective list," said Eisenhower. "The bottom line in all of this needs to be kept in mind. This whole affair is about logistics. Whoever controls the air, controls the supply routes to North Africa—period. We've got the advantage there, but the Luftwaffe has made it hurt. Jerry knows where this game is really going to be won, and that's why they've been going after our biweekly supply convoys with a passion. To date they've already sunk over 75 merchantmen, and damaged another 150 ships. That's half a million tons they put under the sea, and another million sent back to the shipyards since we hit the beaches at Casablanca and Lisbon. They moved in some very experienced torpedo plane squadrons from Norway, and it's been hell out there. The rest of our difficulties have been our own damn fault. Shipments have been misallocated, ships loaded, unloaded, and then loaded again; equipment buried in warehouses when it's needed at the front. The Germans have held us off here with four damn divisions against the dozen we have at hand, and Tunis and Bizerte have everything to do with that."

"There's our problem in a nutshell," said Doolittle. "We've got to mount standing air patrols over both those harbors, and also cover the sea lanes. That doesn't leave us a lot left over for close support, but we're figuring to hold the line at 20%."

"Well no wonder the Germans have been pounding my tanks with *Stukas*

all month," said Patton. "It takes a month to ship them over, another month to get them through the ports to my position, and then the Germans have a field day."

"We're working on it," said Doolittle. "Now that we're running round the clock operations at Maison Blanche, things should improve, but I can't underscore the importance of seizing forward airfields. We need them."

"Well, I hope to god we're hitting them as hard as they hit us."

"Good point," said Eisenhower. "We need to get serious with our interdiction efforts. We'll have to hit their fields hard, send bombers after the ports, and interdict their sea lanes as well."

"We have," said Welsh. "They've taken losses to their merchant shipping as we have, but the Germans are sending in a lot more of those new Siebel ferries through Toulon. Our torpedoes are useless against them, because their draft is so shallow. They just run right under them. And they're too small a target to hit with any consistency with a bomber, particularly at night, which is when they mainly operate."

"Gentlemen," said Eisenhower. "These are all the reasons the Germans forced a stalemate on us here with so few forces. Now we have to show them we mean business. I'm assuming we have adequate supplies forward for BLADERUNNER?"

"My dumping operations concluded last week," said Montgomery, a stickler for logistics, and Patton resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Concluded?" he said facetiously. "Why general, you're two weeks ahead of schedule, and considering we had the holiday season to contend with, that's damn surprising."

"Alright, George," said Bradley, always the peacekeeper. "I'm sure Santa brought you more than a few presents in that interval."

Montgomery cleared his throat, the time for levity over. "Very well, as you all know, the operation before us will have three phases. Contact with the enemy will be almost immediate. He's dug in well, but I shall put in a good long artillery preparation to shake him up. After that we make the big push, where I plan on introducing my armor to attempt to breach his line. Exploitation follows, and should we unhinge his defense in the north, he'll have no recourse but to pull back in the south, which will make your work there all the easier." He eyed Patton. "Now then, we'll push on up the coast through Fort Melila to Philippeville. There's our first forward airfield. You'll

take Constantine, General Patton, which will then put us in a good position to push on to Bone while you take Souk Ahras and El Arba on the Tunisian border."

"I could just as easily turn southeast from Constantine for Tebessa," said Patton. "Once we get that, I can push right into Tunisia and make a run for the coast at Sfax."

"That's a long run, George," said Bradley.

"You want a touchdown? Then someone has to do the running. I'm and old halfback when it comes to battle out here. You try to slug your way up that coastline, and the Germans can feed in one unit after another to slow you down. We need room to maneuver—do some broken field running." He displayed that winning smile.

"All in good time," said Eisenhower. "We need Constantine first. That's the big supply center backstopping their line right now, and from there we have rail lines to Tebessa, Souk Ahras, and up to the coast through Philippeville to Bone. Once we take that, we'll revisit the question. Any drive we make through southern Tunisia will have to be coordinated with 8th Army on the other side. Until then, I expect some hard fighting."

"That's the only kind worth a damn," said Patton. "I'm up against a pretty tough outfit, Rommel's old 10th Panzer Division. They raised a good bit of hell out your way, General Wavell, but I plan on going right through them."

"I'm sure you will, General," said Montgomery. "And your victory will cover my flank perfectly as I drive for Tunis."

Patton gave Monty a narrow eyed smile.

"General Wavell," said Ike. "How soon do you expect to jump off operations aimed at Tripoli."

"Immediately. O'Connor has reorganized and come up on the German Buerat Line south of Sirte. It's going to be more of that same hard fighting, but we think we have the mass in hand to move Rommel this time. They'll defend the coast road as always, but our main effort will be inland. First we'll want to get up through Mahallah to Wadi Zem Zem, and from there we'll flank their the Buerat line by pushing for Bani Walid. After that it's a straight shot for the armor up to Tarhuna, while the infantry clears the coast road through Misrata. Yet it will be some time before we get anywhere near Mareth for a drive into southern Tunisia, particularly if Rommel intends to fight."

That would be an understatement, for Rommel did indeed intend to fight, but not on the Buerat line.

Chapter 5

Rommel could read a map as good as any general that ever fought, and he was soon convinced that the position at Buerat was far from satisfactory. To begin with, it was just over 250 miles along the main road from Tripoli to Sirte, making for a round trip exceeding 500 miles for his supply columns. The ground to the south of his line was open enough to present the British with easy opportunities to flank him, and there was much better ground closer to Tripoli itself at Tarhuna. There, a long stretch of hills and rough ground extended from Al Khums on the coast east of Tripoli, to a position 50 miles south of the city at Garyan.

The British will not get around that line easily, he thought, particularly if I develop the positon around Tarhuna. That is where I want to fight, a defensive line that is within forty to 60 miles of my major supply port, where our air fields are close at hand to provide good support. Yielding the ground between Buerat and Tarhuna won't hand the enemy anything more than wasteland, stretches of desert and the big coastal marshes south of Misrata. There are no good airfields I would lose, except at Sirte, and I'll set my engineers to tearing up that field before I give the order to withdraw.

Back we go, he smiled. Hitler won't like it, but I give the British nothing worth taking. Just one small field at Sirte, and another at Bani Walid, and 200 miles of empty ground for them to haul their lorries over before they can come to grips with me again. The hills and escarpments favor me as well, forming a nice little castle wall that extends south and west, about 50 miles beyond Tripoli. I'll have the fertile ground around the city, plenty of food and water for my men, short supply lines, and good roads. There's even a rail line heading west towards Mareth. If they beat me here, or other events mandate a withdrawal, then Mareth is my next defensive line, perhaps one of the best in North Africa.

Just after the new year, Rommel gave the order for the Italians to pull out, still leaving his own divisions on the line they had held for some time. He knew his enemy had been reorganizing, dumping supplies, expanding the port facilities at Benghazi as well. That strange news concerning the explosion at Tobruk was most interesting. Knowing the British would see the

Italians beginning to move, he gave orders to both his Panzer divisions to stand ready in case the enemy opened their offensive. Yet reports came back from the forward lines that the British were only conducting light patrols with armored cars.

Then, on the 4th of January, a major storm blew in, with gale force winds lashing the port at Benghazi. Ships were thrown into one another, one slipping its moorings and crashing into the inner harbor. Ferries and small boats were tossed about like toys, and four ships were sunk in the bay, completely swamped, including one with 2000 tons of ammunition in her holds. LCTs 106 and 107 foundered and went down, and the general chaos caused by the storm reduced the port from an average of 3000 tons per day in deliveries to no more than 1000.

That will give O'Connor pause, thought Rommel, for he realized that until the British sorted that mess out, they had no real supply port to rely on. Tobruk was still useless according to all reports, the wreckage in the harbor making it unsafe for any shipping, the town itself blasted and burned, and a heavy security blanket thrown over the whole area by the British. His long range recon patrols by the Luftwaffe reported that the enemy was still moving supplies by rail from Cairo and Alexandria, and truck pools were being organized at Mersa Matruh, but that was hundreds of miles behind the current front.

So this is the perfect time to pull out, Rommel realized, and he did so in December, again using inadequate supply deliveries over the 500 mile circuit as his salient reason. Kesselring was nervous about the move, worried that Hitler would react badly and become even more intransigent, but the military storms in Russia had completely absorbed his attention. So he approved the withdrawal, couching it as a redeployment to the main line of defense for Tripoli, and then he inveighed upon Rommel to hold that line, no matter what. He had to do something to appease the Italians.

In surveying that ground, Rommel decided that the open area around Homs would not be suitable to a protracted defense, and so he withdrew west of that city, placing the Italians on the coast near the village of Negazza. There, Hill 151 sat right astride the coast road to anchor that line, and the ground rose as it moved inland to the southwest, screening Tripoli. Those hills would be Rommel's castle wall, where he would post his best infantry to prevent the coastal position from being easily turned. Behind the Italians, he

set the 15th Panzer Division in ready reserve.

Further south, just beyond the thickest part of the hills, was the city of Tarhuna, and it was there that he posted his old favorite 7th Panzer Division under von Funck. He fully expected the British to move into Homs, and there was a good road from that coastal town to Tarhuna, and a lot of open ground to the east that was well suited to a mobile defense. That road passed through Tarhuna, continuing west through lower hills before bending northwest towards Tripoli, so a lot rested on the defense of 7th Panzer.

Behind it, on the road to Tripoli, Rommel set up his own headquarters at the small airstrip of Milga, and he had the 21st Panzer Division gathered there astride the road. If the British tried to flank 7th Panzer and bypass the Tarhuna position, the 21st would be poised to intervene and challenge that move. 90th Light was positioned forward of the 21st with Ramcke and his regiment of Falschirmjaegers on the flank. As for the remainder of the Italian Army, the Trento, Trieste and Superga divisions were placed in a wide arc along the defenses closer to Tripoli, where they were busy improving that ground, adding pill boxes and digging anti-tank ditches.

It was Rommel's intention to fight his enemy on the Tarhuna line, and then if necessary, he would fall back on those inner defenses around Tripoli. The commander he would face this time would not be the implacable Montgomery, who would plan a grueling battle of attrition, well supported by supplies and timed down to the second for the introduction of each division. Instead he would again face the dashing General O'Connor, still enjoying his license as 8th Army Commander, instead of the four quiet walls of a prison cell in Italy.

"We are leaving Buerat," he said at his briefing meeting prior to the battle.

"Hitler will have a fit," said von Bismarck of the 21st Panzer Division. He was a thin man, bespeckled, yet with a wiry strength, even at the age of 52. Rommel knew him well, for he had commanded the motorized regiment of the 7th Panzer Division in 1940 during the dash across France.

"Then let him have his fit," said Rommel. "I can think of no good military reason to stand at Buerat. It has no real natural strength, and it can be easily outflanked. The ground we want is here, astride these hills running inland from the coast west of Homs. The Tarhuna line is much stronger, closer to our supplies and airfields, and not easily flanked. I merely threw a bone to the

Italians by stopping at Buerat, but, the whims of Mussolini and the Italians are no longer any concern. However, we must hold Tripoli as long as possible. We will serve their interests on the strategic level by doing so, but I will choose the ground, not the Italians.

“It looks like you have chosen well,” said Lungerhausen of the 164th Light Infantry.

“You will be here,” Rommel pointed. “The two Italian armored divisions will hold on the coast. You take this high ground and hold their flank. They will push here, but I fully expect them to make a heavy turning movement around Tarhuna to the southwest. That is your post, von Funck. I want you to engage them heavily there. Protect the main road and try and force them south. That’s when they run into Marcks and his 90th Light. And Georg,” he said to Bismarck, “You will backstop both those divisions.”

It was good ground, and a sound deployment, with hardened troops that had already shown the enemy they could win. There was only one thing still lingering in the minds of the Panzer Commanders, and von Funck was the first to raise the issue.

“My division will be the only Panzer troops in immediate contact with the enemy,” he said. “What if they use those heavy tanks again? You know we cannot stop them if they mass that unit against us on that road.”

“That is why you get the lion’s share of all our 88s,” said Rommel. “We can do nothing else but fight them if they come. If they do break through with those monsters, then von Bismarck will meet them here, where the road passes through this defile in the hills. To strengthen that sector, I will place the entire 501st Schwerepanzer Battalion there.”

They were worrying about nothing, as Kinlan was gone, and not even Lieutenant Reeves and those last two Challenger IIs remained in the desert. The great trump card the British once had in hand was played out, and now they would have to win or lose with their own units. Even as the Germans moved out to occupy the positions Rommel had indicated, O’Connor was meeting with his own senior officers to plan his advance.

* * *

“Big of them to give up Buerat and Sirte like that,” said Wimberley, Commanding the veteran 51st Highland Division. General Neil Ritchie had

asked for him directly when he was summoned home to take over the 52nd Lowland division to get it ready for operations. A Scott through and through, Wimberley scoured the Army for good Scottish troops to flesh out the ranks of his division, and was often seen in his tartan patterned kilts to the point where he was called “Tartan Tam” by the men. All the patterns corresponded to various Scottish clans, and he encouraged this to build morale and esprit de corps in the division.

“That was a weak position,” said O’Connor. “I would have gone right around it. Yet now let’s hope they don’t stop here.” He fingered Tarhuna on the map. “I want to push hard now, and see if we can’t run them right out of Tripolitania. Once we get round the bend and up towards Misrata, I want your division in the lead, General Wimberley. You take the coast road right on up through Homs, and 23rd Armored Brigade under Richards will be on your left. General Hughes, will follow with the 44th Home County Division, and 4th Indian follows him.”

“Well what about 7th Armored?” asked General John Harding, a veteran of the fighting at Gallipoli and Gaza in the first war.

“Don’t worry,” said O’Connor. “I couldn’t leave you out of it. I want to form a flying column further south, and for lack of any better handle, we’ll just call it Southforce. That’s your division, John, and you’ll have General Nichols and his 50th Northumbrians right behind you for infantry support. Form up and resupply here, at Bene Ulid. Then take this road through the dry country and hit them here, just southwest of Tarhuna. If they do hold up on that high ground with their infantry, Tarhuna looks to be their Hougoumont. We won’t hit it directly. I want to bypass to the left and push up the main road from there to Tripoli. So the whole thing is a big pincer operation, and you’re the left horn.”

“And my Division?” said General Raymond Briggs of the 1st Armored.

“You’re the head of the bull,” said O’Connor. “I’ll want you southwest of 23rd Brigade, about here I should think. We’ll want to control the road from Homs to Tarhuna, and once you’re on it, you can move to support either side as the situation warrants. I’ll come up and we’ll have a cuppa to sort things out.”

“Very good sir,” said Briggs. “Will you be wanting Darjeeling or Earl Grey?”

Everyone chuckled at that. Tea kept the British going as much as

gasoline. At times the soldiers would actually rattle off a stream of MG rounds just to get the barrel hot enough to immerse in water to heat it for tea. Even the tanks had an organic BV, a boiling vessel to brew up tea. With Ceylon taken by the Japanese, tea supplies were feeling the squeeze, and rations had thinned out in the ranks. In time, that necessity would become a luxury, but for now, the tea was still flowing liberally in North Africa.

O'Connor looked the men over, smiling. "Gentlemen, this is for the prize. 8th Army has wanted Tripoli for as long as Rommel's had his eye on the Nile. It's no coincidence that we're here in Tripolitania, and Rommel is as far from Alexandria as he's ever been. So off we go, and may the lions at dawn tremble at our approach."

That got yet another laugh, but then the General stood quiet for a moment. He took a breath and said something more. "I'd be wrong to say we got here without a lot of hard work, and the blood and guts of a good many men who aren't here to stand with us now. You've all heard the rumors, but let me lay it out for you in the clear. We lost the heavies at Tobruk when the whole place brewed up. They won't have our back any longer, and seeing as though they were a special lot, we may not see their like here again for some time. That was a hard blow. I daresay I owe my own life to those men, and we owe them a debt for what they did in the heat of battle when we needed them. So this is for them, and all the others who died to get us here. We owe them a victory. Let's get to it."

"Here, here," said Wimberley. "I say we drink on it, but if you don't mind, General, how about something a wee bit stronger than tea?"

He raised a flask of gin.

Chapter 6

Hitler leaned heavily over the map, his eyes restless, searching, as he studied the situation in the Med. He had seen the tide of the enemy advance gobble up all of Cyrenaica, and now it flowed into Tripolitania towards that capital, a city that he now designated “Festung Tripoli,” saying it must be defended to the very last man.

“If they take that, then they will have all the air fields,” he said darkly. “It is only 300 miles from Tripoli to Tunis or Syracuse on Sicily, and even less to our bastion at Malta. Those airfields are crucial.”

They might be, thought Halder as he listened. Yes, they might be, if only the Luftwaffe had enough planes to send to them. If Tripoli fell, it would also be a very hard blow for the Italians. They would see Sicily as a viable next step for the Allies, though he believed Kesselring and Rommel could hold Tunisia for some time.

“And look how they have taken most of the French colonies in West North Africa!” said Hitler. That knocked France out of the war as a useful ally, and they are about to do the same to Italy. Useful idiots, the Italians, but useful nonetheless. It amazes me that I can conquer half of Russia, but this hand full of enemy divisions stops us there in North Africa. We must counterattack!”

“My Führer, they have stopped us because we have only enough naval capacity to supply the two armies we already have there,” said Halder, stating the obvious.

“Nonsense,” said Hitler. “Kesselring gave them half the ground they now hold in the west, and Rommel keeps back stepping every chance he gets. What happened to his grand plans of storming in to Alexandria? Haven’t I sent him those new heavy tanks to deal with those of the enemy? Why does he fall back towards Tripoli now, instead of attacking and smashing this General O’Connor? That was why I sent him there in the first place, and all he has done for these last two years is churn up sand and complain he has no fuel, and no air cover. We must find another way. The British are sitting all too comfortably in their Middle East strongholds. They get the oil from Iraq and Iran, and what do we do about it? Nothing! Well, that stops this hour, this

very day."

"What do you mean?" said Halder, the edge of worry creeping into his tone.

"Army Group South has taken Rostov, have they not?" said Hitler. "They are pushing into the Caucasus, but the Russian Black Sea Fleet still sits there on the coast and it will prevent us from shipping any of Volkov's oil to Rumania as planned. It must be destroyed!"

"But My Führer, we have a only a few U-boats in the Black Sea."

"What about the ships Raeder sent to the Med? He has already lost the *Hindenburg*. What good are the others sitting in Toulon?"

"They serve as a strong deterrent against any invasion of Sicily."

Hitler waved that away like a bothersome fly. "They serve only as targets for the RAF. The bombers come to Toulon twice a week now, and if they get those airfields near Tripoli, they will come round the clock. I will order Raeder to send the remainder of our ships to the Black Sea. There is the force we need to destroy the Russian fleet. It is high time we used it. As for the British, I want a full corps assembled and sent south to Bulgaria and Greece."

"What good will they do us there, even if I could assemble troops now to fulfill such an order." Halder was clearly frustrated with this.

"We will invoke our treaty rights with Turkey again. I have had the Todt organizations working on those antiquated rail lines for over a year now, and we can move those troops through Turkey."

Halder's eyes widened with the realization of what Hitler was now proposing. "Don't tell me you have resurrected this old notion of taking Egypt from the north. We already tried that, and you saw the difficulties involved, and the outcome as well."

"That was then," said Hitler. "Admittedly, we were too hasty earlier, and ill-prepared. Now we have better options. Look here." He pointed at the map. "We can now rely on several good rail lines through turkey, and I will order additional motor transport troops to assist. The Army of the Orient will move quickly, so as not to overly frighten the Turks. We will slip in through the front door, and through their living room before they even know we were there. After that, it will just be supply trains and the occasional reinforcement. Our troops will assemble at Adana, then cross quickly into northern Syria. Raeder's new German Black Sea Fleet will destroy the Russian fleet, and this will also clear the way for direct landings on the coast

of Georgia. From there it is only a hop, skip, and jump into Northern Iran. Isn't that where that massive oil field is sited?

"What? You mean Baba Gugur? No, my Führer. It is here, in Northern Iraq, near the city of Kirkuk."

"All the better. We will take that, along with Baku, and then we will push all the way through Iraq to the Persian Gulf and take the British oil concerns there as well. This way, an invasion of Iran may not be necessary. In fact, I believe they will join us when they see us come in such force."

"But this is madness! Where will we get the troops required to support these operations? We are still locked in a death struggle with the Soviets, and everything else has been frozen on the northern front for the drive on Leningrad in the Spring."

"Don't fret, Halder," said Hitler. "If you cannot manage the affair, then I will select the divisions required personally. In fact, I don't think a single Korps will be sufficient. We will need one to move east into Northern Iraq, another to drive through the center and take Baghdad, then move on to the Persian Gulf. The third will move directly into Lebanon and take Damascus in Syria back from the British. This will completely stop their offensive towards Tripoli and Tunisia."

Halder took a deep breath, looking over his shoulder and finding Jodl and Keitel. His eyes clearly indicated that he wanted them at the map table, and when Hitler saw them approach, he stiffened his resolve.

"Do not think you can reinforce your ideas by summoning these other Generals. I have given this a good deal of thought. The British will not expect such an operation. We will take them completely by surprise."

"What operation?" Asked Jodl, looking from Hitler to Halder.

"He has it in his mind to resurrect the old Plan Orient."

"That plan was never shelved," said Hitler quickly, with a wag of his finger. "It was only delayed. And if it will sound better to you, we will call it Operation Phoenix, yes, rising again from the ashes. It is only January, and the campaign in Russia will be frozen solid for another three months. I am told all movement there is impossible now, for both sides. The temperatures are the coldest ever recorded in the last 200 years! In the meantime, while we prepare for the Leningrad operation, I will assemble the forces necessary for Operation Phoenix. In fact, I began these preparations a month ago."

"What preparations?"

“Do not think I rely on you for everything, Halder. If you recall, I flew to the southern front to meet directly with General Manstein in order to discuss the move into the Caucasus. Now that the situation near Kursk has stabilized. I ordered him to begin immediate transfers to the south, so there will be ample forces available for this operation.”

Halder held up his hands in utter frustration. “He thinks we can now move through Turkey again to invade Syria and Iraq!”

“I do not merely *think* this, Halder, I will order it. So you had better stop with this stubborn opposition and instead make yourself useful in support of these plans. If you cannot do so, then I will find someone else to do the job!”

This infuriated Halder, who had been in a torment for months now as he watch the increasingly difficult situation in Russia. Once he had been approached by conspirators plotting to assassinate Hitler, but at that time he had refused to support them. Yet taking advantage of his position of authority, he often kept a loaded pistol in his service jacket pocket, and spent more than one night awake in a sweat as he struggled with the idea of shooting Hitler himself. That weapon was in his pocket now, but he resisted the urge to reach for it and end this madness once and for all.

Yet he could not stand there and listen to Hitler browbeat himself and the other senior officers at OKW any longer. “Are you telling me Manstein is behind this?”

“Of course not,” said Hitler. “Manstein has agreed that the move into the Caucasus could be pressed with greater vigor. To this end, we discussed Operation Edelweiss for the drive on Maykop, and by extension, the occupation of Baku. Of course, such an idea would have never entered your head, Halder. Look at the mess you have gotten us into in Russia! It took my personal intervention, and the considerable skills of General Manstein, to stabilize the situation there.”

“You blame me for the disaster in Russia? This is intolerable! Now you stand there making these foolish proposals, and most likely without even having any notion of the enemy strength, the logistical demands, the political ramifications of your plan. It cannot be done. Jodl… Keitel, tell him this is madness!”

“General Halder!” Hitler raised his voice, his hand displaying the telltale tremor as he removed his spectacles. “I have listened to your stupid rationalizations for far too long. You no longer have the aggressive spirit and

mentality for a job of this caliber. I want men here who will fight, not those who drivel and whimper about what cannot be done. It *will* be done! I will order it, and any man who opposes these orders will be dismissed, or worse."

Now the frustration and anger in Halder became too much. "My Führer… I have supported you through thick and thin, but this is simply too much. I am leaving. Enough with your threats. You may find someone else to preside over this insanity. I am finished!"

With that, Halder turned and stormed out, his hand in his pocket, fist clenched on the pistol, his anger seething. Yet he could not muster the resolve to turn about and use it, any more than Fedorov could have pulled the trigger to kill Sergei Kirov.

Now Jodl and Keitel stood there, aghast at what they had just seen. "Well?" said Hitler, looking at them like an enraged bull. "Do you both wish to join Halder in early retirement, or will you bend your backs to the task at hand here and prove yourselves useful? Send for General Zeitzler. I intend to appoint him as the new Chief-of-Staff of the Army this very moment!"

Neither Jodl or Keitel said a word, seemingly frozen when confronted by Hitler at the very edge of another of his terrible tirades concerning the duplicity and incompetence of his Army Generals. It has long been said that all it will take for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Whether Jodl or Keitel might count themselves in the ranks of good men remained to be seen, but that day they did nothing.

"Rommel could not deliver on his promises to give me Alexandria, and now he has his back to Tripoli!" Hitler reiterated his reason for this alarming new plan blooming in his mind like a dark rose. "Therefore I am now reinstating several previous Führer Directives. Order Number 30, concerning the movement of troops to Syria and Iraq will be reinstated immediately. All available mountain troops will be used, even if such forces are already allocated to the Leningrad Operation. Furthermore, Führer Order Number 32 will now stand as the overall guide for the remainder of our winter operations, and Plan Orient will be redesignated Operation Phoenix. Has anyone of you even noticed that the Japanese have recently taken Ceylon? They do not lack the imagination of my Generals, do they? Nor do they stand about whining over fuel and supplies. They just go and take them. These things will be found. The troops will be found, and this operation will proceed."

Finally Jodl found his voice. “Then you mean to invade Iraq?”

“How else can I get to the Persian Gulf? And I also mean to invade Syria. How else will I get to Cairo? These operations will now be given the highest military priority. I will select the divisions personally and, unless you wish to follow Halder into the dustbin of history, you will carry out the orders I give and see to all the details. Understood? That is not all. Führer Directive Number 28 will also be reinstated—Operation Merkur.”

“But that will mean we will have to pull all the air mobile divisions out of North Africa,” said Keitel.

“Then do so! At Once! I will not allow the British to build up bomber bases on that island. It should have been taken long ago.”

Jodl passed a moment recalling that it had been Hitler who personally cancelled those plans for the invasion of Crete, all in favor of leap frogging directly into Lebanon and Syria after taking Cyprus. Of course, he said nothing of this, as Hitler rambled on.

“The plans for Operation Merkur will be re-activated immediately. The 15th Infantry Division presently at Toulon may be sent to replace the Fallschirmjagers, but I want them all ready for an airborne operation against Crete in short order. I have already ordered Goring to begin moving the necessary troop transports to Greece, and the shipping will be found—see to that, Jodl. See if Raeder can scrape up a few troop ships to move my mountain divisions. You have two weeks. I want this entire operation ready by the 15th of January.”

Hitler swept back the hair that had fallen onto his brow, slowly composing himself. “A pity Halder lost his nerve,” he said slowly. “This Operation Merkur was one of his old favorites. All the plans are there. You need only find them and sweep the cobwebs off of them. So get busy, gentlemen. I will order Raeder and Goring to arrange support.”

Everything was give and take with the Army, and if he wanted to reinstate these grand plans, it was clear that something else had to be abandoned, and it would have to be something on the Russian Front. Later that same day, his eyes pouring over lists of troops and divisions, Hitler rescinded his stand fast order to General Walter Model, and told him to begin extricating his 2nd Panzer Armee, including the 47th Panzer Korps, and the 12th Infantry Korps, from the pocket they were in near Voronezh. The wergild he would pay for those troops would be that hard won city.

Advised by Keitel that his plan would need several fast motorized divisions, and perhaps one or two good panzer divisions, he took the 10th Motorized Division from reserve behind Volgograd, and then selected the elite Brandenburg Motorized Division. There were already mountain troops still holding in Northern Syria, and he recalled the 1st Mountain Division under Kubler to join them. He also added a Jaeger Division from the 49th Geiberg's Korps in the Caucasus, and the SS Prinz Eugen Mountain Division. Convinced that he needed an experienced and aggressive Panzer Leader, he decided to give Heinz Guderian one last call to glory, this time far from the debilitating snows of Russia. Surprised at the offer, Guderian accepted. The following order of battle was the overall force structure for Plan Orient, now renamed Operation Phoenix.

GERMAN ARMY – OPERATION PHOENIX –7 JAN 43
General Heinz Guderian

14th Panzer Korps - General Hans Hube (Irak Force)
3rd Panzer Division
4th Panzer Division
10th Motorized Infantry Division
Brandenburg Motorized Infantry Division – 5 Brigades

49th Geibergs Korps - General Ludwig Kubler (Syria Force)
1st Mountain Division
6th Mountain Division
SS Prinz Eugen Mountain Division
104th Jaeger Division (Arriving from Serbia 1 FEB 43)

12th Infantry Korps – General Walther Gräßner
(To be made available pending outcome of initial operations)
31st Infantry Division
34th Infantry Division
45th Infantry Division

GERMAN ARMY – OPERATION MERKUR – 28 JAN 43

7thFleigerKorps – General Kurt Student
1st Fallshirmjager Division (Three regiments)
2nd Fallshirmjager Division (Two regiments)
22nd Luftland Air Mobile Division. (Theater Reserve)
5th Mountain Division (Held in reserve for Operation Merkur)

On Cyprus:
78 Sturm Division
(Assigned to Syrian Front and replaced by 746th Inf Reg)

After making these selections, General Model was reassigned to help oversee preparation for the Leningrad operation as soon as weather permitted in Russia. Since that was to be the major thrust this year, Hitler saw no reason why he should not prune the ranks of armies assigned to the central front, particularly forces facing off the Russians at Moscow, and southeast through Orel to Voronezh. He gave orders re-directing new panzer allocations so they would go directly to the 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions to bring them up to strength, and pulling "Der Mensch," General Hans Hube, out of France was the perfect choice for the new commander of the 14th Panzer Korps.

Keitel recommended that Hube's old 16th Panzer Division, still in France, should go to General Günther Angern. There it would stand in reserve for possible deployment to North Africa, and this development would literally breathe new life into General Angern. In the old history, he had killed himself in February of 1943, at a place then call 'Stalingrad'…. But that would never happen, nor would his new division be destroyed there and be resurrected as the 116th later in the war. As for Model's 12th Infantry Korps, it would be sent to Greece first for much needed rest, and to receive new recruits. Then it would be placed in general reserve to support all these operations.

The Führer was quite satisfied when he completed his reassignments, buoyant in spite of the row he had with Halder. Now he saw General Zeitzler as the perfect replacement for Halder, a breath of fresh wind for OKW, and he had every confidence that his new directives would be the undoing of all British aspirations in Egypt and the Middle East. He gave the order that Operation Phoenix would begin no later than January 7th, to be followed in three weeks by Operation Merkur.

The war was about to spin off in an entire new direction.

Part III

The Halfback

"*Victory requires payment in advance.*"

—Football slogan

Chapter 7

When Kesselring got the order to send all his air mobile and mountain troops to Toulon he was incensed. Two regiments of Kubler's 1st Mountain Division were holding the southern extreme of his line outside Batna, not only guarding that vital pass, but also covering the left of his two Panzer divisions in the center. In the north, the entire line was presently being held by the tough, veteran troops of 7th Flieger Korps, including the 22nd Luftland Division. He met with General von Arnim to give him the bad news, still distraught over the development.

"What?" Von Arnim was astonished. "How in the world am I supposed to hold this front without those troops?"

"They are sending us the 15th Infantry Division from Toulon as a replacement." Kesselring pulled off his gloves, leaning over the map table, seeing von Arnim shake his head in amazement.

"Well why don't they just use those troops for their purposes and leave well enough alone here? This will cause a major dislocation of forces. It will be impossible to hold our current positions under these circumstances."

"For some reason, they want Student's entire Korps!" Kesselring had not been informed of the full scope of what Hitler was now planning, but his orders had come directly from OKW, and with emphasis that the full force of a Führerbefehl was behind the directive. What about the 327th Infantry?" he asked.

"They had the worst of it at Algiers," said von Arnim. "I moved them back to Constantine to refit and rest."

"Well we will have to use them."

"This is madness! We'll be lucky if we can even hold any line west of Constantine now. We may even have to retreat all the way back into Tunisia!"

"So be it," said Kesselring. "I agree that the present line cannot be held, but now you must fight a very stubborn rear guard action while we rebuild our defenses further east."

"With what? I'll need both Panzer Divisions together to have any chance at all of slowing one of their armies down. Who do I pick, Montgomery or

Patton? They've been building up for the last two months, and Montgomery is wound up like a spring on the northern coast. An attack is imminent. Patton has been probing aggressively for the last two weeks."

"Then it will hit thin air," said Kesselring. "That will be most disconcerting for them. We must use the terrain skillfully here, slow them down on the narrow roads through all these mountains." He waved his hand over the map, his mind already rating terrain features for their defensive merit. In the old history, Kesselring had been a master of the art of defense, which he clearly demonstrated during the battle for Sicily and fighting in Italy. A Luftwaffe General, he had always fought with his beloved Fallschirmjagers, and to see them summarily taken from him now was a hard blow.

"Thin air," said von Arnim bitterly. "That is a very apt description of our front line if we have to give up those troops."

"Come now," said Kesselring, always the optimist, which is why he was often called "Smiling Albert" by other officers. "I have been sending over a lot of service troops with the Siebel ferry deliveries. I have flak units, and I've used these men to form a number of ad hoc battalions—some motorized with the supply column trucks. I have five March Battalions and another five leg battalions in and around Tunis. The Italians are also promising us more help. We will just have to make do with what we have. It can't be helped."

"What about Rommel?" said von Arnim bitterly. "He just stole away the 501st Schwerepanzer battalion, and he has more troops in Libya than he really needs to defend Tripoli."

"What? Rommel? He's still whining that you have his 10th Panzer Division. No, I'm afraid getting anything from him now will be like pulling a tooth without anesthetic. This General O'Connor is getting ready for a big push on Tripoli."

"Undoubtedly timed for the big push here on Tunis," said von Arnim bitterly.

"Don't worry," said Kesselring. "Rommel will stop them. He's had a little taste of victory again after Mersa Brega."

"Oh? You call that a victory? He withdrew all the way to Tarhuna—abandoned that line at Buerat over the objection of Bastico and even Mussolini."

"Yes, he can be infuriating at times, but that line at Buerat was useless.

Now he's in a much better position at Tarhuna. He can hold there easily, if he doesn't get any notion about racing off to Alexandria again."

"Then tell him I need support here."

"I will see what I can do for you. In the meantime, I will get the 15th Infantry to Tunis as quickly as possible. Begin pulling out tonight, and all the air mobile units get priority on the available rolling stock. It's too risky to move them by plane."

Von Arnim was resigned to his fate, though he would stew about this, and quite bitterly, for some time after. There was already little love between him and Rommel. Now he saw this as yet another example of Rommel throwing his Blue Max around and getting his way at the dinner table, while his own command would have to gnaw at any bone that happened to fall on the floor.

"What is happening, Albert?" he asked his superior officer, knowing him well enough to be on a first name basis like that.

"I don't have all the details," said Kesselring, but Goring is sending Auntie Ju to Greece in droves." Auntie Ju was the nickname the Germans had given to their stolid Ju-52 transport planes. "I think there's a big operation in the offing. They want Student's troops, and that means an air operation is forthcoming, possibly at Crete."

"Crete? That operation was cancelled long ago."

"You know how Hitler's mind works. He never quite got over the failure of Operation Condor. Frankly, Crete should have been taken long ago. We're lucky we had the presence of mind to take Malta when we did. If we had not done so when the British were weak there, they would have made that place a real thorn in our belly. Now I fear that Crete will be a much tougher nut to crack as well."

"Then Hitler is willing to trade what's left of Algeria for that island? Doesn't he realize what these orders of his will do here?"

"Whether he realizes it or not hardly matters," said Kesselring. "At least this time I won't have to gnash my teeth to choose ground I want when it involves a withdrawal. We must fight hard here, be very stubborn, but I will have a new line in place for you when you get further east. This sector looks promising."

Kesselring pointed at the map, running his finger. "This sector here, between Khenchela and the pass south of Ain Beida must be held. It screens the American access to Tebessa, and you know that they will want that as

their forward base for a push into central and southern Tunisia."

"Correct," said von Arnim with a shrug. "Batna was the cork in the bottle, but if Kubler has to go, I'll try to fight a delaying action there with Fischer's 10th Panzer."

"Use that as a hinge to anchor your defense in the south. Then swing all the rest back east, like a door opening. We'll try and run the line up through Constantine to Philippeville on the coast. That's the best we can do for now. After that, we fall back to Tebessa itself, which becomes the new southern hinge, and then run the line up through Mesoula to Souk Ahras to Bone on the coast, right along this rail line."

"They'll pick up quite a few airfields."

"We can't help that. But I'll make certain that we get our planes and service crews out early. We've plenty of good fields around Tunis and Bizerte. Those ports are the key to this whole theater, along with Tripoli. If we lose those, it's over."

"Alright, Herr General, I will do what I can with the panzer divisions, and if you can get anything more from Rommel, it would certainly help."

That very day, the withdrawal began, as surreptitiously as the Germans could make it. Heavy equipment was pulled off the line and loaded on trucks, but mines were laid liberally to delay any pursuit. Bridges were wired for demolition, the unused portion of the rail lines wrecked, and then, after night fell, the troops formed up columns and proceeded with all headlights out, guided by a single vehicle in the van.

The following morning, the 3rd of January, Montgomery kicked off his offensive in the typical grand way with a massive bombardment. The shells fell on abandoned positions, blasted away wire, detonated mines, but did little more than kick up a lot of dirt and dust. Then the 2nd Lothian Border Horse led the way for 6th Armored Division, advancing along the coastal rail line from Bougie. Surprised to find no real resistance, they met and drove off a small flak company the 22nd Luftland had left along a river near Les Falais.

1st Derbyshire Yeomanry followed, pushing over the river at a shallow segment and continuing the advance until they met the Schwere company of 22nd Recon Battalion. Then 16th and 17th Lancers came up, with a mix of Churchills, Valentines and Crusader IIIs. The only hindrance they encountered was from above, where Kesselring had the Luftwaffe out to interdict the key roads and go after any columns of opportunity.

Further inland the 3rd Mixed Division led with the 43rd RTR from its 33rd Armored Brigade, and then the 1st Grenadier Guards Infantry Battalion. About 15 kilometers on, they found a bridge blown and there seemed to be no way around it for the tanks. A small group of German flak guns began firing on the Grenadiers, prompting the tanks to load H.E. shells and return with a massed volley. Then the infantry worked around two sides of the enemy position to clear it out, but the blown bridge was going to need engineers.

Monty thought things were going swimmingly, until reports indicated no serious fighting anywhere along his line of advance. By day's end, he would have his troops strung out along the few good roads, with the columns stretching back some 50 kilometers to a point well beyond Bougie.

"They've snookered me," he said to his able Chief of Staff, Sir Francis Wilfred de Guingand. Those around him simply called him Freddie de Guingand, a long-time friend of the general who had been given a leg up to get into the saddle on more than one occasion by Monty. Freddie had failed his entrance exam to the Staff College, but Montgomery saw that he was admitted. That meant nothing, for the close working relationship between the two trumped all. Monty said he had a quick and clear brain, a responsible man to work out the details of his plans and leave the broad stroke thinking to the General. He would serve at Monty's side for the duration of the war.

"It seems so," said Freddie. "But why in the world would they give up such a well prepared position like that? It doesn't make any sense. They can't be throwing in the towel before we've even had the match."

"I see more in this than meets the eye," said Montgomery. "It's no tactical withdrawal. RAF is seeing columns heading east to Tunisia, but it's mostly the infantry."

"Interesting," said Freddie, thinking. "Yet these are some of their best troops here, the parachute units that took Malta and Grand Canaria from us."

"Good riddance," said Montgomery, but de Guingand put that thought in his pocket, and he would be later responsible for whispering in the right ear and suggesting that the Army have a look at the garrison strength on Crete. A good chess player, he was given to plotting out his moves well ahead in his mind, thinking out any contingency. When he learned the Paras were not simply redeploying, but were mustering at Tunis and Bizerte, he raised the matter with Sir Alan Brooke. It was very timely advice.

"Patton will be happy," said Monty. "I'm told the Germans pulled those

mountain troops off the ridges to either side of Batna. Now he'll try to bluster his way through and get to Tebessa. I want to be at Bone when he does that. Understand?"

"Of course," said Freddie, thinking again about those mountain troops, light infantry, but very tough in rugged country.

Further south, the American 9th Infantry Division advanced cautiously through the town of Setif, taking the airfield and finding it had been hastily abandoned, with empty fuel barrels and hoses strewn about the field, which had also been subjected to demolition. There were three wide craters at intervals along the landing strip, no more than a few hour's work for bull dozers, but enough to prevent any landing by Allied planes there in the short run. The first real resistance would be met at Saint Arnaud, astride the main rail from Algiers to Tunis. There, two battalions of Panzergrenadiers from the Hermann Goring Division had set up a hasty blocking position.

Below the 9th, the 3rd Infantry was pushing for Merouana, a town near Batna in the high country that was needed to flank the main objective, expecting a hard fight there, but pleasantly surprised to be able to take the place with no resistance on the first day. Batna, however, would not be given up by von Arnim without a fight. There he positioned three small Kampfgruppes, KG Luder's mechanized Panzergrenadiers, a battalion of motorized infantry under Hudel, and Hauptmann Hansen's small tank battalion, with a number of Pz IVF-2s and Marder IIIs.

'Terrible Terry Allen' sent his 26th Regiment to flank Batna in the highland country near Qued El Ma, then he pushed the 18th Regiment right up the rail line to Batna, through the pass where he expected heavy fighting. It was going to be infantry work in those mountain passes, with the armor coming along behind to offer fire support. There the 18th Regiment met and drove back KG Luder, but Hudel's tanks came up to halt the attack at dusk, and that night the Germans would pull out to move to their next delaying position further east. The Hermann Goring Division would fight briefly, then quickly pull out to take up its primary defensive position just west of Constantine.

Meanwhile, the 15th Infantry Division was hastening to Bizerte and Tunis by sea. They would land on the 6th of January, moving quickly by trucks that had been prepositioned by Kesselring. All in all, the administrative and logistical skill of both Kesselring and von Arnim was clearly demonstrated,

after years of practical experience planning such moves. It was a masterpiece of maneuver, like that of a skilled boxer dancing about the ring, keeping his heavier opponent at bay with the occasional jab, but mostly the strength and surety of his legs.

It is always more difficult for the advancing force when moving into territory that was formerly held by the enemy. Kesselring could move his units east with little caution, save for the occasional attack by Allied planes. Monty and Patton had to advance not knowing whether the next house or farm would be hiding a Pak 50 AT gun, always wary of mines, and other small ambushes staged by detachments the Germans would leave behind. Suspected enemy positions had to be scouted, patrols leading the way as the Allied columns probed forward.

By January 6th, the 9th Infantry would reach the airfield at Telergma, and Terry Allen's 1st Infantry took Batna. That was the place where Patton wanted to set up his first new forward depot, and he gave orders to get the supply columns moving immediately. 1st and 2nd Armored followed the infantry until the highland country was cleared and the ground began to descend into the lowlands beyond. Ahead there were places with famous names—Kasserine, El Guettar, Faid…. Patton was thinking about them even as Freddie de Guingand was looking ahead in his own mind to consider what the Germans were up to.

As for Patton, the game was football, and he was the halfback, scanning the defensive line to see what he would soon be up against when he got the ball. One thing he inherently knew about war was that 'victory required payment in advance,' with the determination of his iron will, the sweat of constant effort, and the blood and guts of the men he commanded in battle.

It was time for some 'broken field running.'

Chapter 8

“We’ve got Batna, Brad. Now’s the time to rattle Harmon and Truscott and get that armor moving up. I want the two divisions side by side when I go for Tebessa.”

“Tebessa? You’re supposed to take Constantine first George.”

“That’s work for infantry,” Patton waved his hand dismissively. He was an old cavalryman at heart, and he loved those armored divisions, particularly the 2nd, which he had commanded from late 1940 in the States, until January of 1942.

“Look here, Brad. There’s a few rats in the cellars at Batna, but once I clear them out, I want to push right up to Ain Beida. There’s an airfield there we can use, and the pass just south of that town lets me dash right on through towards Tebessa.”

“But Montgomery is expecting you to go for Gulema in a left hook. You know how difficult the ground is on the coast.”

“If he wants me to do that, then he ought to send a division up to get after Constantine himself. Then I can swing 3rd and 9th Infantry right around that southern flank, and *they* can take Gulema for him. Meanwhile, I’ve got business at Tebessa.”

“Have you cleared that with Ike?”

“Well hell… If I do that he’ll just start talking logistics again. Look, the Germans have pulled out, and we’ve got them on the run. Now’s the time to gain some good ground. I can be in Tunisia in ten days!”

General Bradley scratched his head. “Eisenhower said we’d talk about Tebessa after we had Constantine. If you split your force now, and send both armored divisions down there…”

“Now don’t get all wishy washy on me Brad. I know you’re spying for Eisenhower, but goddammit, you’re also my Deputy Commander. We’ve been sitting there waiting for Montgomery to stockpile his tea leaves for well over a month. Now that we’re finally moving again, that’s exactly what we should do. In this war, you move fast, hit hard, and never look back. That’s what the Germans showed the Brits in France, and I intend to show them they aren’t the only ones out there with a crazy old horse cavalryman in the

saddle."

"You looking to add another star soon George?"

"Forget about that. It's the Huns I'm after. When things shake loose like this, you've got to seize the day." Patton clenched his gloved fist to make his point. "I intend to drive hard and fast here."

"Well don't get yourself killed. I've seen how you ride about in that staff car. And you might want to leave off the flags and siren so the Stukas won't get after you again."

Patton smiled. "Did I ever tell you about the uniform I designed?"

"Too many times," said Bradley, and the two men laughed it off.

"Alright George, I won't break the news on this just yet, but you'll have to do this right. If you turn southeast, you better be able to get where you're going. Remember what Ike said about the mess we created here with the logistics. You could get hung out there and find yourself out of supply."

"I'll find the roads, Brad. Then you line the trucks up in my wake. Just follow my tracks and smoke." He gave Bradley that patented full mouthed grin. "One more thing," he continued. "I'll want Terry Allen's outfit with me. We'll need some good infantry, and that will flesh out that Corps. Now… why don't you get on the phone and see about Monty sending a division for Constantine."

"What? He thinks you've assigned that to the 9th Infantry."

"Well tell him the plan has changed. Say we'll fix the German defense on one side so he can make a direct attack. Then I can swing round and go for Guelema. He'll like that."

"I'm sure he will."

* * *

Logistics.

Interdiction.

As far as Eisenhower was now concerned, that was the game he was playing, even if Patton thought he was playing football. The Allied group of forces was demonstrating one key area of growing superiority as this campaign progressed—they were slowly tearing the Luftwaffe to shreds. Goring's force had been strained by Operation Condor, where many transports were lost and the incessant duels with the RAF over the islands had

taken a toll. When the makeshift fields had been hastily abandoned, any plane that could not fly had to be left behind. A retreating army loses a percentage of its men and materiel with each day that it withdraws. The genius of Operation Torch, was that by taking Casablanca, it removed the Germans primary logistical support base for the Condor Operation, and the tremendous success of the Operations in Spain returned Gibraltar soon after.

Now, one thing the Allies were doing with far more precision and organization was air operations. The directive that the emphasis was to be given to air superiority and interdiction was paying good dividends. The German position in North Africa now relied on three ports—Tripoli, Tunis and Bizerte, and now each one would receive daily visits from Allied bombers escorted by P-38s, and a new plane that was just beginning to arrive in theater to replace the aging Kittyhawks and Tomahawks—the P-51 Mustang.

The U.S. 47th Fighter Group had been flying the old P-39 Aircobras, and now they would trade those obsolete planes in for shiny new Mustangs and take to the skies with renewed confidence. In the old history, the Allies interdiction effort against those three ports sent over 620 tanks bound for North Africa to the bottom of the Med, along with more than 1700 other vehicles, and just over 1400 pieces of artillery, including flak guns. That was enough armor to equip three full strength panzer divisions, all lost at sea on perhaps the shortest supply run imaginable.

If the Germans had not abandoned the Canary Islands when they did, this growing preponderance of force in the air would have strangled that position by now, stranding those elite air mobile divisions and slowly starving them out. Kesselring had the mind to see that immediately, and conducted a brilliant withdrawal into Algeria, where he had been basically fighting a delaying operation against the cumbersome Allied advance on the ground.

Generals talk divisions, but wars are won by good logistics, and the real battle that would decide this campaign was now taking place in the skies above the battlefield. There, the Luftwaffe was continuing to sustain daily losses that could simply not be replaced. Before May of 1943, when the Allies finally drove them from Tunisia in the old history, the Luftwaffe lost just under 2,500 aircraft, a staggering total that amounted to nearly 40% of their total strength on all fronts. That was going to matter a very great deal in the months ahead in 1943, and it was happening again now, as the Allied

pilots rose daily to wrestle air superiority from their enemy so those bombers could get at the ports and vital sea lanes to North Africa.

Now Hitler had compounded the problem Goring was facing in any number of ways. First off, he was diverting too many resources into prototype weapons, long range bomber designs, and the massive new airship fleet he was building. The tried and true Me-109s were still being built, but there were not enough of them, and the deadly *Stuka* was slowly being neutralized wherever the Allies gained local air superiority.

Secondly, Hitler was now opening up a massive new front again in Syria and Iraq with Operation Phoenix, and he was resurrecting the plans for Operation Merkur against Crete, a battle that would rely heavily on the Luftwaffe in every respect. In the short run, with the snows and bad weather in Russia grounding most everything in the dead of winter. Goring transferred one wing after another to the west to service the needs of these operations, but there never seemed to be enough planes to go around.

Seeing the problem glaringly for the first time, the Reichsmarschall suggested a range of expedient measures, including better flak defenses for the harbors, a heavy anti-submarine screen laid in the Sicilian Narrows, the use of new German radar to warn of enemy air attacks. Finally, he suggested Tunis should be the main receiving port, and more Siebel ferries could be used along the coast to move supplies to Tripoli. He also wanted better organization of the port service crews, and faster and smaller convoys moving by night. Yet many of the dock workers found they were spending as much time fighting fires on the quays, warehouses, and piers than loading or unloading ships. In frustration, Goring then suggested Italian subs be used to move ammunition, certain they could not be bombed.

The fact that this discussion was even held was mute testimony to the increasing ineffectiveness of the Luftwaffe—but nothing was said to the Reichsmarschall about that. In the summer it had been the heat, dust, and flies that plagued the troops most. Now it was the cold, particularly at night, then the mud by day, and another pestilence that seemed to be everywhere—the Arabs.

The local tribes had become expert scavengers, raiding corpses of the fallen, encampments, depot sites, or anyplace that did not have a round-the-clock guard. They would steal everything, even the tarp screens put up to offer a little privacy around the latrine trenches.

When it rained, tanks would trundle along the roads, digging deeper and deeper channels in the ground that would turn the road to a muddy morass. Off road movement was equally treacherous, and at one point, an American patrol of three Stuart tanks saw the lead tank drive right into a muddy field and begin to sink. To their amazement, the tank had sunk all the way to the edge of the turret in ten minutes time as the crews scrambled out.

The Germans had made friends with mud in Russia like this, and they knew how and when to move, and how to hunker down in the rain after choosing their defensive positions. This situation was the one element that would serve to frustrate Patton's hankering for a rapid advance.

* * *

With his opening moves largely unchallenged, Monty decided it was time to push on up the coast. He would soon find that he had to contend with more than the Germans. January rains can be quite heavy in Algeria and Tunisia, particularly on the coast.

With Patton determined to flank Constantine to the south and east, Monty assigned his dogged 43rd Wessex Division to take the place, attacking through Ain Kerma to the northwest. It was an old Roman town, perched high in the mountains, with sheer cliff walls of stone bridged by steel spans in places, and low stone bridges over steep defiles and gullies. Known as 'The City of Bridges', if the Germans decided to destroy them, they could make the place largely impassible to vehicle traffic. It had been conquered by the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs and Turks over the long centuries. Then the French came, followed by the Germans, and now the British.

The sand colored building seemed to rise from the tops of the cliffs, as if carved out of the mountains and then smoothed and sanded for human habitation. The place had been taken with little fighting in the old history, but now the Germans had moved in their 15th Infantry Division, a veteran unit that had fought in Poland, France and Russia. They had deployed in an arc about ten kilometers outside the city, blocking all the major roads through the rugged mountains.

The 43rd was advancing on Highway 2 from the west, and also coming up on Route 27 from the coast. Both roads ran along the north and south banks of a river, and there were really no suitable roads moving due east from

that point to El Kantour. Everything ran up through Constantine, and Monty's supplies would have to do so as well, so the place had to be taken.

5th Wiltshire Battalion was up early that cold morning, climbing out of their 'funk holes' in the damp earth and hoping there would be no more rain. They huddled about their camp fires while they got the char brewed up, a mix of tea and milk. It was bully beef as usual for breakfast, but today they got biscuits and jam as well.

"We're moving out in an hour," said Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts to Sergeant Knowles as he finish up a cold shave. One always had to meet the enemy looking like a proper gentleman. "No lying doggo today, Sergeant. We'll be on the road all morning up to Constantine."

"Very good sir. Is our lot in the van again today?"

"Of course, the fighting 5th. And I'll want the men sharp this morning. These mountain roads can be treacherous—a perfect place for an ambush or two. I'll want patrols out and flankers to look for Jerry as soon as we get moving."

They would see the first 20 kilometers under foot easily enough, with no sign of the enemy. Then they reached the small village of Ebm Ziad, and the infantry began to move in, squad by squad, the men silent and cautious, expecting a fight. The Germans had abandoned that town, but found better positions in the hills just beyond it. 5th Wiltshire came right up on them, and the Lieutenant ordered an immediate attack.

Soon the harsh cut of MG fire tore through the cold mid-day air, and the pop of mortar fire punctuated the action. 4th Wiltshire Battalion was second in line under Lt Colonel Edward Luce, reaching the village in the thick of that engagement. They moved into the high ground to the south, thinking to find a way to flank the German position, and joined the attack. 4th Somerset was the last of the brigade, commanded by Brigadier George Mole, the "Mighty Mole" as the men called him, because he always had the men dig in at night whenever the division halted for the day.

That initial scrap was going to take all afternoon, for the German infantry was well positioned, with good overlapping fields of fire for their machineguns. The rest of the division was advancing to the north, with one regiment on a secondary road through Ain Kerma, and the other on Route 27. Both those roads joined about two kilometers northwest of the city, and that is where the German 106th Regiment waited on defense. Stopped by the

stalwart enemy, the British would resort to their artillery in an attempt to blast the Germans from their stony fox holes.

To the south of Constantine, General Anderson's 3rd US Division had sent its 30th regiment toward the city, but only as a screening force to allow the Allies to organize the airfield at Telergma. The other two regiments swung due east around a high spur of mountains, heading for Ain Fakrour, along the rail line from Constantine that ran down to the larger settlement of Ain Beida, and then on through Meskiana, Les Bains and eventually reaching Tebessa. That was the rail line Patton wanted to reach as soon as possible, for it had a spur that ran southwest to the town of Khlencheld, and that could be served by road from his forward depot at Batna. The rail line from Batna itself ran directly up to Constantine, and Patton smirked to Bradley as the two men rolled forward behind the long column of the 9th Infantry Division.

"Monty won't take Constantine any time soon, which is why I need to clear that rail line from Ain Fakrour to Tebessa. I've got the two armored divisions on that road to Khlencheld right now, and Terry Allen is coming up on the place from the south. I think we'd better get over there, as there's likely to be one hell of a traffic jam."

"George, it will be a week to ten days before you can use that rail spur? How will you get rolling stock there?"

"We don't need that. There's a perfectly good road following that rail line. That and the hard rail bed will save us from this goddamned mud. I'll want Allen to take his 1st Infantry due north to Ain Beida from there, while the armor continues east towards Tebessa."

The infantry were taking the available roads around the Chott country, low depressions that were overgrown with scrub, with wadis and sand pits mixed in. The Armor would bypass the worst of it to the south, but Patton's three infantry divisions would deploy to take that strategic rail line, with General Eddy's 9th tasked with taking the vital road and rail hub at Ain Beida, and Terry Allen's 1st following the armor further east towards Tebessa.

"Leave it to me, Brad. I'll hand Ike Tebessa before Montgomery has Constantine, let alone Bone on the coast. You'll see."

Chapter 9

The Luftwaffe had seen what Patton was up to, and now it was time for Generalleutnant Fischer of the 10th Panzer Division to decide what to do about it. The rail line Patton wanted from Constantine to Tebessa was his watch, and he had his division strung out all along it, from Ain Fakrour in the north to Ain Beida, where he set his HQ. The bulk of his defense had been in the north, where his Panzergrenadiers had dug in through the old ruins just south of Ain Fakrour, to the fortified rail station there, and on down to the air strip at El Boughi. He had his three Panzer battalions in reserve, but when the Americans were reported massing at Khlencheld to the south, he was quite surprised.

Fischer was in a bad mood that day, possibly feeling the shadow of Death over his shoulder. If the old history had its way, he would have only a month left to live, for he had been killed when his staff car hit a mine in an unmarked Italian minefield near Mareth. The explosion would take one arm and both legs, leaving him stunned and bleeding to death. Yet he remained conscious, ordering that pen and paper be brought to him, and with is one remaining good arm, he managed to write a page and a half to his wife before he lost consciousness and died.

A man of war, he spent his last minutes with the one woman on this earth that he had truly loved, and not in giving orders to his troops as to who would take command, and what he wanted done. But he was nowhere near that hidden mine today, yet Death still had a month to lure him to his fate. Now that his enemy was doing something he had not expected, Fischer was even more grumpy.

“What are they doing down there? By God, they want Tebessa! But they will split their army in two if they go there.”

That city was 85 Kilometers to his southeast, and his was the only division in this sector. He could not hold where he was and still stop Patton’s move to Tebessa, and he immediately got on the telephone to von Arnim at Souk Ahras.

“The Americans are moving southeast to Tebessa, and we have nothing there but some flak units and a few Grenzwacht Kompanies. Now I’m

charged with holding a front line of over 140 kilometers, and we'll be outnumbered five to one."

"Then you will have to fight for time," said von Arnim. "I have Pfeiffer's Group south of Constantine, but there's no movement there. I'll have to give them the city, but I can hold in the mountain passes beyond with one regiment of the 15th Infantry. Move the bulk of your division south, but you must hold Ain Beida, and leave one good Kampfgruppe north of there to stop them from flanking you. Kesselring has promised me another infantry division, and the 334th is landing at Tunis today."

"The 334th?"

"A new division. One regiment is composed of mountain troops. I'll try to motorize the other two and send them directly to Tebessa by rail. That will anchor your defense in the south"

"What about the Hermann Goring Brigade?"

"I can't touch that. It's the only mechanized force backstopping our defense north along the coast. The 334th will have to do. They're green, but if you put some panzers at their backside, they'll fight."

Peiffer had an ad hoc regiment composed of KG Luder, the Hansen 190th Panzer Battalion backed by some para pioneers that had been withdrawing east to Tunis, and a third motorized infantry battalion, KG Hudel. He left those in the fortified airfield of El Bey south of Constantine, but ordered the others south along the road and rail that would lead through El Beida to Tebessa. They went up over a high mountain pass and descended to find the first battalions of the 9th Infantry deploying to attack Ain Fakrour.

Hauptmann Hansen had 69 tanks, mostly Pz IV-F2s, but also four tigers that had been stolen from the 501st before it went to Rommel. He attacked immediately, catching 2nd Battalion of the 15th Infantry Regiment in the open. Upon placing a company of AT guns on the road to watch his flank, they ran into a second German battalion there, and so now the word was sent back that they had at last found the enemy. General Eddy decided to double down and send up the 30th RCT, which was next in line of march. He spent all morning on the 8th of January to make these deployments, but by mid-day he was ready to attack through the old ruins near the railway station southwest of Ain Fakrour.

The Panzergrenadiers were in the sturdy warehouse and rail car buildings at the station, their MGs barking as the us infantry began to advance. There,

on a feeder rail spur at the station, the was a damaged boxcar, its rusty metal sides pot marked by bullets. A German MG team was inside, lying prone, and pinning down a lot of infantry that had to go to ground in the open approaches to the station. The Americans tried to hit the rail car with a mortar, but kept missing. Then, an enterprising Corporal got on the radio to his air support liaison and asked for some help. Apparently Patton's complaints had been taken to heart, for ten minutes later a flight of three P-38s came roaring in and shot that rail car to pieces with their Hispano 20mm cannon.

Further south, the bulk of the US 9th Division was deploying to attack Ain Beida, but the Germans received support from a regiment of the promised 334th Infantry Division. The trains had labored all night long to get them there from Tunis, and the 754th Regiment arrived just in time to join a counterattack being staged by Fischer's 69th Pz Grenadiers. But the German defense was like an archipelago of islands stretched out along that rail line. They had kampfgruppes at Ain Fakrour, Ain Beida, and at Meskiana to the south west of that hub, where Fischer had sent his 7th Panzer Regiment. They were about to make the acquaintance of the revitalized 1st Armored Division.

Taking the lead in Patton's drive East, 'Old Ironsides' was out to start working on its reputation. CCA under Colonel Robinette had pushed due east towards Tebessa, but CCB took the road up to Meskiana. A-Company of the 13th Armored regiment attacked with a battalion of armored engineers, pushing right for the town, and C-Company joined on the right. But Brigadier General Oliver sent all the rest of his command east of the town, just bypassing it completely. They were driving to cut the second rail line to Tebessa that came down from the north, and by so doing, isolate Patton's main objective from further reinforcement. Patton had told them to flow east like water, engaging resistance, but flowing around it wherever possible.

There the Germans met and fought the new American M3 Sherman, with the 75mm gun. It was a far better tank than those they had faced earlier, but no match for the Panzer IV-F2, let alone the Lions whenever they were present. They ripped apart a good number of those American tanks.

While Oliver's CCB locked horns with those panzers, Colonel Robinette's CCA had been moving east along a secondary road that joined the main road northwest of Tebessa. They were therefore headed away from the fight, for the Americans had boldly divided their 1st Armored Division,

thinking they had no more than a regiment to contend with at Meskiana. The problem was that this was a full Panzer Regiment, and they were now learning renewed respect for the German tankers. So when Patton heard Oliver had a hot fight on his hands, he quickly redirected the entire 2nd Armored Division up the road towards Meskiana. They began arriving in the thick of that fight, deploying their SPGs to begin pouring on supporting fire against the German tanks.

While Oliver's command had mostly M5 Stuarts, just a few of the newer US tanks, 2nd Armored had been completely re-equipped. They brought up two full medium battalions, and went right after the German panzers in the village of Meskiana. On the defense, the Germans usually enjoyed a good range advantage on their enemies, but in those close quarters, with the tanks in and through the adobe like buildings, the action came to point blank range at times. Had the German panzers been supported with good infantry and artillery, it would have been a real mess for Oliver's command. But an order was soon to come that would end this initial duel. The threat to Tebessa was growing more serious by the hour, and a small raiding force under Colonel Semms was about to garner a most distinctive honor.

Since high mountains screened Tebessa to the west and south, The path taken by Colonel Robinette's CCA was the only clear avenue of attack. Yet Patton had also sent a fast moving force under Colonel Semms, the old "Blade Force" from the real history, only minus the British contingent. It had three companies of M5 Stuarts, some artillery, flak, and an engineer platoon, and they scouted south of those mountains to try and reach the road as it ran southeast from Tebessa to Thelepte.

So it was that on the 8th of January, A-Company, of 66th Armored Cav, was the first Allied unit to cross the border and enter Tunisia. Even though the German 755th Regiment of the 334th had arrived by rail to reinforce Tebessa, the Germans simply did not have enough troops to defend that southern approach. When they found it largely undefended, Semms got on the radio and informed Patton that the 'way around the right' was wide open.

"Good," said Patton. "Now I want you to go right for Thelepte along that road. I'll send up the 1st Infantry to take the position you're holding now."

Patton was demonstrating remarkable flexibility as he advanced. He had kept Terry Allen's Division in the basket behind his armor, and he was parceling out that infantry wherever it was needed, in effect, building

Kampfgruppes on the spot as the Germans might have done. This kind of flexibility was not yet endemic to the US forces, but it was to Patton. Where he took personal charge of the battle, results followed. Brigadier Roosevelt's 26th RCT got orders to move out at once. And the sheer audacity of Patton's 'broken field running' was about to unhinge the entire German defense.

* * *

Kesselring flew into Souk Ahras to confer with von Arnim, finding him at his wits end. "I've had to break up 10th Panzer in to three Kampfgruppes, and now each one is tangling with a full enemy division. They are holding, but that won't last long. The odds are too great. I simply cannot hold the line between Constantine and Tebessa with that single division."

"I sent you Weber's 334th Division," said von Arnim.

"Yes, but they're raw, and I can only use them in a defensive role. At the moment, we're keeping them out of Ain Beida and Tebessa, but they are pushing mechanized patrols through any gap in the line they find, and there's nothing I can do about it. If I have to hold these towns, I cannot maneuver."

"What about Montgomery?"

"We're holding there. Both the 327th and 15th Infantry got into good defensive positions before the British kicked off their offensive. We actually have a coherent line there."

"And Constantine?"

"It's ours, but I cannot see any benefit in holding it. All it does is stand as a bulwark between the British and Americans. We should just blow all the key bridges there, and then pull out. We can hold the mountain passes east of that city with far fewer troops."

"That makes sense." Kesselring looked over the map. "Alright… Pull the 15th Infantry Division north of Constantine and continue defending the coastal area. Leave the Ersatz battalion in the city itself to see to those bridges. With the bulk of Ernst Hell's 15th Division in the north, I think I can then safely transfer Conrath's troops south to support your defense there. Since the rail lines will be cut, Ain Beida no longer matters. We won't be able to keep it supplied, so finish up your counterattack and then pull out tonight. Reform 10th Panzer Here, at Medkour, about 35 kilometers north of Ain Beida. The Herman Goring troops will come down to meet you there.

Then you will have the force you need to put in a real attack. I completely understand your situation now. I must admit that the Americans have moved much farther south than we expected. I thought the British would keep those dogs on a tight leash, covering Montgomery's flank on the coast."

"There' isn't much we can do until I'm reinforced," said von Arnim dejectedly. "They can go all the way to Sfax!"

"I moved the Italian Superga Mountain Division to Thelepte," Said Kesselring. "That will help hold the southern sector. Below that, it's all Chott country. But we'll need to control the passes along the eastern and western dorsal ranges."

"What about Rommel?" asked von Arnim. "Can't he send anything more?"

"He's in the thick of it with the British 8th Army. There's a big fight underway at the Tarhuna line. I think he will hold there easily enough, but after that, we must convene a meeting and reach a general understanding of how to proceed here. It's clear that even with the 334th Division, we won't be able to stop Montgomery and Patton for long. So we must now strongly consider the merits of giving up Tripolitania altogether, so we can concentrate both our armies in Tunisia. All the supplies are being funneled through Tunis anyway after Goring's "reforms" to the supply chain. Rommel is getting few convoys to Tripoli. Sfax and Sousse are more important to us now than that port."

"Hitler will throw a fit if Rommel gives up Tripolitania," said von Arnim. "Not to mention Mussolini and the Italians. That's their last colony in North Africa."

"Well this was all Hitler's doing," said Kesselring. "That redeployment order cost us everything here. Now we have the equivalent of about four plus divisions in this army, and we are facing ten or eleven Allied divisions in Algeria. At the very least, I will demand that Rommel send us one of his three Panzer Divisions. We simply have too wide a front to hold. As for the Italians, Mussolini has always had an eye for Tunisia. He'd much rather have that than Libya. So I think we might persuade them—tell them we will cede Tunisia to their control if we can hold it."

That was the real dilemma now. Where the Germans decided to stand and fight, they could hold the ground and even counterattack to hurt their enemy. Yet they did not have the troops to be everywhere. By all rights, Kesselring

and the 5th Panzer Army might have been able to adequately defend the northern approaches to Tunis and Bizerte. But Patton's sudden and unexpected thrust towards Tebessa had forced them to divide this small army and defend two widely separated fronts. They had to therefore choose their ground carefully, moving to defend key roads through passes, and trading space for time.

In all truth, Patton's advance was a haphazard, breakneck affair. That first company to cross the Tunisian border got lost, wandering in the mountains over narrow tracks until it eventually came to the wide plain that led to a very famous pass at a place called Kasserine.

Part IV

Chariots of Fire

"How frugal is the Chariot
That bears a Human soul!"

—Emily Dickinson

Chapter 10

The Allies wouldn't get to Tunis any time soon, but a few brave men would try, and with a most unusual device. It looked like a typical 533mm, 21-inch torpedo, except there was a dual metal saddle on its back that could be mounted by two British Frogmen. The British got the idea from the Italians, who had enjoyed spectacular success slipping into British harbors on similar contraptions they called their "pigs." Two British submarine officers, Commander Geoffrey Sladen and Lt. Commander William "Tiny" Fell, came up with the design and the means to carry it to the target area on the deck of a submarine in a special container. Looking for a better name, they called their design a "Chariot," and sought to use these self-propelled torpedoes to aid in the interdiction of enemy ports in Sicily and North Africa.

Strangely, Sladen had been aboard the submarine *Trident* in Nordic waters, and once had the distinct honor to meet and transport a very prominent Russian Admiral back to the UK—Volsky himself. That man no longer existed, but a shadow of his being had been resurrected aboard yet another submarine, one that the men of the T-Class boats could scarcely comprehend. Now Sladen set his mind on perfecting his Chariot design, hoping it could bring fire and destruction to the enemy's most protected harbors.

It was not a suicide ride like the Japanese *Kaiten* manned torpedo, for the Chariot itself was never rigged to explode. It was merely meant to transport those two divers, and the nose of the torpedo had a detachable 600 pound warhead that would be removed and mounted on the hull of a target ship like a Limpet mine. The Chariots could ride on the surface, and also submerge to move underwater by battery power, not at the swift speed of a torpedo, but at a sedate four knots over a four hour period, giving them a range of 16 nautical miles. Slowing down to three knots could extend this another two miles. With the first Chariots delivered in June of 1942, the British had attempted an attack on the *Tirpitz* in the heavily defended base at Nordstern, but rough seas swamped the tiny craft, and they had to abort.

Now eight more Chariots had arrived at Algiers harbor, along with the submarines *Trooper* and *Thunderbolt*. In the real history, they had mustered

at Malta for ‘Operation Principal’ against Palermo on Sicily. Here they would stage at Algiers to target Tunis and Bizerte. The big Allied ground push was aiming to seize both those ports, and they wanted to prevent the Germans from sinking ships to block those harbor entrances. That operation would be dubbed “Welcome,” but it would be the last attempted, at a time when Allied ground forces were poised to take those ports. Before then, any shipping in either harbor would be fair game for the daring British frogmen.

Trooper was only four months old, commissioned in August of 1942, a little over 1500 tons and capable of 9 knots when submerged. The boat was led by a man with a most interesting name. Lt. John Somerton Wraith moved to *Trooper* from the submarine *Upright* in June of 1942, and was assigned to support operations in the Med. Tall, aristocratic in aspect and demeanor, Wraith was eager to put the new devices to good use. His crew and boat had spent the entire month of December training to deploy the Chariots, and they were finally given their first target, not Palermo, but Bizerte.

Life aboard his sub was no easy matter. Conditions were smelly and cramped, the food terrible, fresh water scarce, the air stale, and danger ever present. Now ‘The Wraith,’ as he was called, would have a pair of strange contraptions on his deck, and four extra men to fit into the crowded interior space of that sub. The daily ration of rum was a small consolation under such conditions, but the men bore up and endured. Many would not choose to be anywhere else, for there was something about the undersea service that was strangely alluring. Sixty men would go out on *Trooper*; another sixty on *Thunderbolt*. They would put their grubby service to the task at hand, eager to do something strangely different this time out. The two boats had worked out together in the Clyde for two months before sailing to the Med. Now they were ready for some action.

The cylindrical containers on the outer decks were 24 feet long, and about five and a half feet in circumference. Lieutenant Wraith could immediately feel the difference in the way his boat handled when the chariots were slipped inside and he put to sea, burdened like a mule. He had to keep his speed down, and be cautious with course changes, so as not to rattle his deck cargo and give his position away. The two subs crept along the coast, stopping briefly by night to approach the small port of Bone for a little periscope reconnaissance. As dawn approached they stayed submerged, wary of being spotted by German air patrols. There was very little sea traffic between

Bizerte and Bone, for the Germans were content to land their supplies at the two major ports and move them overland by truck. Yet the sea was far from empty.

Somewhere out there, the Italian sub *Dandolo* was hunting off Algiers, for 39 merchantmen were due into the harbor, escorted by TF-33 with five US Destroyers. U-73 under Oberleutnant Deckert was also on the prowl. He had Helmut Rosenbaum's old boat, a man that had been fated to get the carrier *Eagle* on his last sortie with U-73. That had been during the ill-fated Operation Pedestal, an operation that was shadowed by a strange intruder that had appeared in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Yet that was history that had already been re-written on this meridian. The Germans took Malta, so there was never a reason to mount such a relief operation as Operation Pedestal, and the mighty *Kirov* had sailed north around the top of the world to the Pacific in this Second Coming. In spite of that, Rosenbaum had enough success in the Med to warrant the transfer to the Black Sea, where he was now organizing a small flotilla of U-boats to neutralize the Soviet Black Sea Fleet at Novorossiysk.

Horst Deckert was on the conning tower of U-73 that morning, his Iron Cross, 1st Class, hanging prominently beneath his left shirt pocket, a cigarette dangling between the thumb and fingers of his right hand. His officer's cap was ruffled from too much use, and he looked tired, yet his eyes were searching the still grey waters, looking for any sign of trouble. He was feeling flush, for on New Year's Day, he had caught the last US Convoy, UGS-3, and put two torpedoes into the Liberty Ship *Arthur Middleton*. He had hit her right on the bow, the explosion so spectacular that he knew he must have ignited a part of her cargo. He could clearly see portions of the hull plate careening up into the sky, followed quickly by a sheet of roaring flame. The damage was so severe that it nearly blew the bow right off the ship, which immediately began to sink, taking 81 crewmen with her, and only three of those men survived.

Harry Cooke was among the dead, a man who had applied for a position as an officer in the US Navy in 1942. While he waited for news on that, his mother harangued him for idling about Boston while so many others were serving dutifully. So he signed on to the *Arthur Middleton* to bide the time and get a little experience at sea. He was just a Junior 3rd Mate, and right before setting sail from New York he wrote home to his mother to say he had

been given the high honor of taking charge of the ship's cat. His mother would get two more letters, one announcing the sinking and his tragic death, the second arriving weeks later, congratulating him on his acceptance as an officer in the USN.

There were a hundred stories like that written every day in this war, lives, hopes, dreams, memories, aspirations all packed onto ships to venture out on the high seas, and the dark U-boats lurking in the shadowy depths were out there waiting for them. Harry Cooke was just one of those little stories, and there were 77 more on the *Arthur Middleton* that night, all letters that would soon reach the states with their dark news of Deckert's accomplishment.

It was a strange thing that put metals on a man's chest for such an endeavor. Deckert already had three, and he had just added 7,176 tons to his account. They counted the weight of the ships they killed, not the lives of the men who sailed in them. Perhaps that was a way of maintaining some thin moral distance from the act of ordering those torpedoes into the water. At least Deckert always thought that way. He was killing ships, not men.

A year later, he would take that same boat out from Toulon to prowl off Oran for a repeat performance. Another convoy was lining up to enter the harbor, and Deckert would line up on the Liberty ship *John S. Copley*. He would again put a torpedo into that ship's starboard side, just forward of the mainmast. Flooding and an eight degree list ensued, and the crew was put off, but the damage was later found to be light enough to save the ship. Deckert would be hounded by the convoy escorts for his trouble, and destroyers *Woolsey* and *Trippe* would rush to the scene, force him to submerge with gunfire, and then put depth charges on his boat. There were 34 survivors, Deckert among them, but he would receive no more medals for torpedoing Liberty Ships, and spend the rest of the war as a P.O.W.

This day, however, he would be caught up in a comedy of errors as he hovered off Algiers, making ready to return home soon. It was then that his sharp eye spotted a periscope, and he quickly flicked his cigarette overboard and hastened below. His 1st Warrant Officer, Heinz Bentzein was there to greet him.

"No fresh air for you, Heintz," said Deckert quickly. "Take us down. There's another boat out there, and it's very close. Come right ten degrees and dive!" Deckert had spotted the *Trooper*, leaving port submerged with her secret little cargo on deck and easing out to sea. The next minutes were very

tense, and Deckert slowed to a near crawl after he was submerged, wanting to be as quiet as possible.

“Close call,” said Bentzein, “but I don’t think they’re on to us. Let’s get out of here.”

“What’s the hurry?” said Deckert. “That has to be a British sub, and you know damn well where they’re going—Bizerte, or perhaps even Tunis to lay off the harbor and wait for our next convoy.”

“Why do you say that?” said Bentzein, stroking his full beard beneath hair that was slicked back tight on his head with gel, gleaming in the wan light. He would not get his own boat until November that year, U-425 up north in the Arctic. And he would be one of the hungriest U-boat commanders ever to put to sea, mounting nine war patrols over 211 days and failing to sink a single ship before being sunk off Murmansk by the British sloop *Lark* and corvette *Alnwick Castle.* The events of the next 48 hours would be the most excitement he would experience in the entire war.

“They could be going to Palermo, you know,” he suggested.

Deckert was not deterred. “Bizerte,” he said. “That’s where the action is now, and we might as well get in on what they’re up to before we head home.”

“What? We’re due back at La Spezia in just a few days. We don’t even have any torpedoes left.”

“We’ll get there,” said Deckert. “What do you say Fritz? Shall we see what they’re up to?” He looked at his young 2nd Warrant Officer, Detlev Fritz, just 22 years old, a fresh faced lad who had been bothered by bad dreams of late. Fritz had served with Rosenbaum in this same position, and each night while he slept, his mind filled up with visions of a ship, long and powerfully built, its battlements towering up and crowned by strange antennae and rotating radar sets. He was seeing things that once were, but events that had not survived the rudder turn *Kirov* made after its second coming to this war. A few of the other crewmen were also bothered by those dreams, but few talked about it, except Fritz, and so the memories remained hidden, silent vestiges of another life.

“Maybe you’ll get a chance to spot that battleship you keep talking about,” Deckert said with a wink. So it was decided to wait until things settled down, and then head east towards the friendly port of Bizerte. By day they would travel submerged, but as soon as darkness fell, they would surface

to get that fresh air, and could cruise all night on the dark waters, relatively safe from air attack.

For his part, Lieutenant Wraith had seen the German U-boat, but he was under orders not to engage unless his boat was directly threatened. He lowered his periscope, laid low after a course change, and then resumed course for Bizerte, not knowing that the enterprising Deckert was snooping about in his wake. The following day, Deckert was close enough to spot the *Trooper* as it surfaced, seeing the odd silhouette of the enemy boat in the distance briefly before it submerged again.

“Strange,” he said. “They have something on deck, very bulky—some kind of container.”

“Probably full of mines,” said Bentzein, arms folded, and still clearly unhappy to be off on this wild goose chase. That was perhaps a reason why Deckert would get nearly 40,000 tons before he was hit himself, and Bentzein would wander the northern seas day after day with nary a kill to his name. “What are we doing here?” he complained. “Just wasting time and fuel oil. You can’t do anything about them.”

“Oh yes we can,” said Deckert. “If we can stay on their trail, then we can call in the Luftwaffe.”

“Who’s to say they won’t attack us?” said Bentzein, ever cautious.

The other boat angled off into the shadows, and hovered, listening with his sonar operator for some time, but they could not get enough information to locate the enemy’s position. So he just followed his hunch, continuing on for Bizerte, low and slow.

The following evening, just after dusk, the two British subs reached the vicinity of Cap Blanc north of Bizerte undetected, or so they believed, and unaware that a silent shadow had been stalking them all the way from Algiers. They spotted a periscope under the moonlight, thinking it was the third member of their little mission *Unruffled*, which had been assigned as a rescue submarine. That boat was running very late, and was still 50 miles from the scene, but they had no message stating that.

It never occurred to Lieutenant Wraith that he had just spotted a German U-boat instead of the one he expected to meet there, *Unruffled*. So he gave the order to proceed with the operation. Half an hour later they surfaced briefly, and the divers began to mount up their Chariots. Lt. Rodney Dove and Leading Seaman James Freel had the first launch on Chariot #16, and Lt.

Richard Greenland and Leading Signalman Alex Ferrier would saddle up and take in Chariot #22. A mile off their starboard side, the *Thunderbolt* was launching two more Chariots, but it would be *Trooper's* little contingent that would have all the luck that night.

They had launched a few miles east of Cape Blanc, just where the headland dipped down towards Bizerte. All the Chariots had to do was follow the long dark coastline south to find the harbor, a journey of no more than four miles. Cruising at their top speed, they would make that in an hour. They would find the small breakwater that capped off Avant Port, the outer harbor, and then figure some way to penetrate the anti-sub netting. That could be tricky, and the crews off the *Thunderbolt* immediately ran into trouble. The battery failed on one Chariot, with a minor explosion under water that forced the two divers to try and surface to try and sort things out.

It was a chaotic moment when it happened, the dull pop underwater shaking the Chariot, and Petty Officer John Miln was thinking they had been hit by gunfire. He could see Boatswain's Mate Simpson roll off the saddle behind him, clutching his leg, a stream of dark blood in the water. He reached for the man, but saw him disappear into the depths. Unsure of what had happened, and alone in that wild moment, Miln realized that his Chariot had lost all power, and that he would now have no recourse but to abandon it and hope he could make it to the shore. It was simply too far to try and swim north to look for their subs again. He looked in vain for Simpson, but never found him, eventually pulling himself ashore near Andalucia Beach north of the harbor, wet, tired and disheartened. He would soon become a prisoner of war, but there were still three other Chariots out there, hoping to succeed where the first one had failed.

Chapter 11

Unfortunately, the other Chariot off *Thunderbolt* would also have problems, not with their torpedo, but with one of the men riding it. Lt. Cook had guided his Chariot quietly towards the south entrance, beyond the long breakwater. The men submerged to try and find a way through the anti-submarine netting, but the ride thus far had left Cook in some distress, his inner ear conspiring to give him a bad case of seasickness. With his stomach queasy, he now had to breathe underwater through his mask, and was struggling to keep his meager breakfast down, when a sudden ill-timed move near the netting saw it snag his suit and cause a bad gash. Seaman Harold Worthy was behind him, and he turned to show him his badly compromised suit, then rubbed his stomach and pointed to the surface. He got there just in time to rip off his face mask and heave out his guts. A few seconds later, Worthy bobbed to the surface beside him on the Chariot.

"What's wrong?"

"Sick to my bloody guts. You'll have to go on without me."

"And then where does that leave you?" said Worthy.

"Go on, I can tread water out here until you get back."

"Not on your life," Worthy couldn't just leave him out there like that. "Get back in the saddle, and I'll at least get you to shore. Then I'll have a go."

They did that, making it south to Rimel Beach at a little spit of land that jutted out to allow Worthy to keep the Chariot from going aground. He figured he still had two hours of battery power left, which would be enough to make a run for the harbor, and then get back here to recover his mate. Keeping as quiet as he could, he struggled to get the Chariot turned around again and pointed out to sea.

It was after midnight now, and a heavier swell started to work its way through the channel. Worthy got the Chariot out to sea again, intending to move north before turning left to make his approach to the southern harbor entrance. As he went, it became more and more difficult to manage the Chariot, which had really been designed to be operated by two men to keep it stable in the water.

Without Cook in the saddle behind him, his backside was too light, and the swell kept batting the tail about, which would force him to strain to correct it. He soon found himself veering off in one direction, then laboring to turn his craft, only to see it veer off again. He was too long at sea, and near exhausted before he realized he could simply not maneuver the damn thing against the swell. The only thing to do would be to try and get back to Cook and see if he might have recovered enough to lend a hand. So he turned about, this time the swell working in his favor to help carry him along, but when he reached the coast where they had been, he could find no sign of his mate there at all.

Cursing his bad luck, he now knew he had to get back out to sea to ditch his Chariot in deeper water so it would not be taken by the enemy. He managed that, and then had no choice other than to swim for the shore again, hoping he might find Cook this time and that the two of them could find some place to hide and work up a plan to reach one of the submarines. It was not to be. When he finally reached the shore again, it wasn't ten minutes before an enemy patrol found him, and he would soon discover that they already had a very miserable and unhappy Lieutenant Cook as well.

Thankfully, *Trooper's* Chariots would have better luck. Lt. Richard Greenland and Leading Signalman Alex Ferrier took in Chariot #22 to reach the netting protecting the north harbor entrance, and found a way through after the application of a good pair of bolt cutters. Once they got into the dark harbor, they could see there were very slim pickings. A single cargo vessel was tied off on the long central jetty, but there was also a good sized warship at hand, and that got their attention immediately.

"Not much in the cupboard," said the Lieutenant. "But it looks like we're here first, so we'll have a go at that cruiser over there. Let's dive and make our approach."

The warhead was 600 pounds of Torpex, and they spent some minutes under water, slowly and carefully working it off the nose of the Chariot. They were down near the bottom of the ship's hull, completely undetected, and elated to have a real warship at hand to attack. It was a very new ship, and one that seemed fated to make their acquaintance.

Built at Palermo, the light cruiser *Ulpio Traiano* had been named after the Emperor Trajan, and was only commissioned in November of 1942. She was in the *Capitani Romani* Class, about 5,500 tons full load, a sleek, beautiful

ship that was faster than a gale force wind at 41 knots. At trials, this ship had even bettered that, and made all of 43 knots, which made her a very useful ship in a tight spot, with eight 5.3-inch deck guns, another 16 small AA caliber guns, and eight 533mm torpedoes. She could race in to deliver those lances with that dashing speed, or leave a trail of up to 70 mines bobbing in the water behind her.

That was the very same ship these two men had attacked at Palermo on the old Prime Meridian, but the cruiser had moved here to Bizerte on a supply run, planning to leave a few hours before dawn for the run back to Palermo. Fate seemed a dogged shadow that night, and Greenland and Ferrier would get that ship no matter where it was berthed. At sea, with a full head of steam up, the cruiser would have been invulnerable to such a cumbersome attack, but there, tied off quietly at the jetty, she was a proverbial sitting duck.

Now another torpedo of sorts was hugging her hull in the depths of the shadowy harbor, while the two men struggled to get that warhead attached, and then make as stealthy a withdrawal as possible. Even as they worked, neither man knew that Chariot #16 off the *Trooper* had also made it through a gap in the netting, and they were going after the same ship until they spied the other team and Chariot in the murky water and turned about. Instead they would have to try their luck on the *Capo Pino*, an old French Merchant cargo liner that had been commandeered by the Italians.

Lt. Rodney Dove and Leading Seaman James Freel piloted Chariot #16, fixing their charge and then finding that they could not get the motor restarted on the Chariot to maneuver out of the harbor. Knowing they could not hitch a ride with their comrades on the other side of the harbor, they resolved to try and slip ashore and lose themselves in the city. That plan did not work out, and they were captured by an alert guardsman patrolling the quays.

“Just what do you think you’re doing here,” he managed in reasonable English. “Spies, are you?”

“Spies?” said Lieutenant Dove. “Not at all. Just doing a bit of sightseeing, but there isn’t much here. Take that ship there,” he pointed. “You won’t even have that to look at soon.” He looked down at his watch. “Another minute, I should think.”

That minute passed, and the British frogmen started to think their charge had failed when there was a sudden explosion across the harbor, and they saw the Italian cruiser literally lifted out of the water, the 600 pound charge

breaking her back with perfect placement. A few seconds later their own charge went off, and after shirking with the explosion, Lieutenant Dove just gave the guard a sheepish look, seeing the man had leveled his rifle at them.

“Come now,” he said. “War is war. We’ve done our job here, fair and square, and we’re your prisoner. I can assure you, if the situation were reversed, you would get fair treatment from us.”

“Move along!” the man said gruffly.

As for the crew of Chariot #22, they were just approaching the netting when their charge went off with that rollicking explosion. Realizing that the alarm would be up all around the harbor in seconds, they simply poured on the power and rammed the netting, the weight and force of the Chariot pushing right on through. Now all they had to do was get back north to look for one of the submarines.

They found one, seeing a light winking at them in the dark swells of the channel. So they made for it with renewed determination, elated to have taken out that warship, and glad their comrades had also scored a hit that night. As they eased up to the sub, Lieutenant Greenland shouted up. “Never more glad to see you! A tin of Bully Beef is going to go down quite nicely after this romp.”

Men were out on the deck of the sub, a rope thrown over for the two divers to grasp, but as they climbed, Greenland looked up to see a man holding a submachinegun on him. It was the number two Warrant Officer off U-73, and minutes later they were hauled up and led below, soon eye to eye with Oberleutnant Deckert. He was quite pleased at the little fish he had caught with his due diligence, and eager to interrogate these men.

“You see, Bentzein,” he said to his Number One. “Now we have one of their underwater torpedoes, and we’ll just tow it into the harbor and drop these two off. Let’s hope the Luftwaffe can get out after that enemy submarine we tailed at first light.” He looked at the two bedraggled divers, and he spoke in the King’s English.

“We knew you were up to something,” he said. “I spotted you yesterday off Algiers, and there was something very odd about the silhouette of your sub. How many are you?”

“Come now,” said Lieutenant Dove, “you really don’t expect us to answer that.”

“No, but it never hurts to ask.” Deckert smiled at him. “I admire your

gall," he said. "They say the British are always too busy drinking their tea to get busy with this war, but this little caper was quite imaginative."

"The Degos have given us fits with much of the same," said Dove. "Turnabout is always fair play."

"I suppose it is. So why don't you tell me where your submarine is so I can go up and put a torpedo into it. If you wish, I'll strap the two of you aboard before I fire, since you enjoy riding those fish so much."

Both men knew that was nonsense, and Dove just gave his mate a look and shrugged. "You might want to be very careful about that," he said by way of warning the other man. "Our boys in the undersea service may not get the press you do in your U-boats, but we know what we're about."

"I have little doubt," said Deckert. "Very well, Fritz, take them aft, and find them some tea. They deserve it."

The two British submarines waited off Cap Blanc for some time, lurking quietly in the depths. At a pre-designated hour, each one put up a periscope to have a look about for the others. They were to wait no more than three hours before pulling out, as they needed to be as far west towards Algiers as possible before daylight the following morning. By that time, word of the raid would have spread and the enemy would be certain to have air patrols up looking hungrily for any sign of the enemy.

None of the three subs spotted any of the diver teams. They had all ridden their Chariots of Fire into the breach of war, and were now considered expendable, just like all the men on the ships they killed that day in the harbor. Lieutenant Wraith sighed, looking at his watch. He had let his spirits go, and none came back. Then he gave the order to come about.

Trooper and *Thunderbolt* would return empty, and the rescue boat, *Unruffled*, would also see nothing for some time. Then, just as they were making ready to depart, the sub's commander saw what looked like another sub on the surface ahead. Lieutenant John Stevens was sure it wasn't either *Trooper* or *Thunderbolt*, and it looked like it was towing something.

"Load tube one and three," he said quietly. "I think we've got a line on a U-boat out there."

"Loading tubes one and three!"

"Come right five degrees and steady at four knots."

"Aye sir, coming right and steady on."

"Sir!" came the word from the sonar listening station. "High speed props!

I think a destroyer has gotten wind of us."

Lieutenant Stevens, spun about, swiveling the periscope as he moved, and peering through the cupped lens. "Damn," he swore. "Come right ten degrees and dive!"

The crew could hear the dull pop of naval gunfire, and the woosh of the rounds coming, but when they heard the first explosion, Stevens thought it must be wide off the mark. It was.

The Freccia class destroyer *Saetta*, was an older ship, launched in 1932 and now commanded by Lt. Cdr. Enea Picchio. When the alarm was raised, he had been at the edge of the harbor at Tunis to the south, ready to begin his morning patrols. Receiving a radio call about the attack underway at Bizerte, he fired up all three boilers and sped north.

Saetta had a pair of twin 120mm (4.7-inch) deck guns and two 40mm pom-pom AA guns that were also firing, but not at Lieutenant Stevens' boat. They had seen U-73 on the surface instead, and it was clearly towing what looked to be a small mini sub or diving torpedo of the same sort the Italians would use. Thinking it was a British sub, he heartily engaged, firing first, and thinking to ask questions later.

Deckert heard the rounds coming in, shocked to see he was now under fire by his own side. He could either try to run up his colors and try to signal the destroyer, but he had no idea whether they would heed such a call, nor could he say anything in Italian. His other choice was to do what any other submarine commander might under fire, and dive.

"Cut that damn think loose!" he yelled. "Dive!"

Deckert was lucky that the gunners aboard Picchio's destroyer were a little groggy eyed that morning. He got his boat down before the Italian destroyer could get rounds close enough to matter, and then went steaming off to the northwest, his feathers well ruffled, and his 1st Warrant Officer Bentzein shaking his head dismissively.

"I told you!" said Number One. "If those crazy Italians don't get us first, then it will be our own *Stukas* in another ten minutes. We should be well up into the Tyrrhenian Sea by now."

"And miss out on all this?" said Deckert with a wink. "Don't worry, Bentzein. I'm a slippery fish. They won't get me that easy."

That would hold true for Deckert, until the 16th of December, 1943, and he would spend the next Christmas with the British. Bentzein wasn't aboard

when that happened. He had slipped off in November of 1943 to report to Kiel for his first command, U-425, and on the 17th of February, 1945, he would meet up with *Lark* and *Alnwick Castle,* meeting his maker soon after.

Chapter 12

Fafnir and *Fraenir* were up early that day, greeting the new year's sun as it gleamed off the massive swelling silver canvas of the airships. They had a rendezvous to make, eager to join their two new brothers.

In the last months of 1942, production had been steady on the airship fleet. Hitler had ordered twelve ships, and two more were now ready to join the fleet, *Aegir*, ruler of the sea in Norse Mythology, and *Asgard*, named after the land of the Gods. They had all been ordered to Berlin for a grand air parade over the city for Hitler's delight. Then they would be off on their real mission, flying southwest over Poland and along the border of the Ukraine to Odessa, climbing high to escape the eyes of curious bystanders, and enemies who might ask what they were about.

Each ship had been specially modified to carry a very special cargo, fruit that had been ripening on the tree of German research and development for some time. Like the cleverly modified torpedoes that had become Britain's Chariots of Fire, this one might have been mistaken for a torpedo as well—until the two stubby wings were mounted. Hitler called the new secret weapons his *Schwarzkrähe*, Black Crows, and they were all painted jet black to advance this image in his mind. They would be testing the latest model of Germany's new Argus pulsejet engine, a simple gasoline powered design.

The whole project had been masked with a phony code name, the *Flakzielgerat 76*, which would roughly translate as the "Flak aiming apparatus." It was referred to as the FZG-76, and began initial air launched flight testing over the Baltic Sea near Bornholm Island, a site very close to the development nest at Peenemünde. The British knew where it was on the Baltic coast as early as 1941, when a Norwegian engineering student was able to pass a detailed description of the facility to British intelligence. In May of 1942, a Spitfire photo-recon mission was sent to investigate, and several suspicious external features were spotted, one of which was "Test Stand VII" for the secret V-2 project launches.

But the *Schwarzkrähe* had nothing to do with that. They were, however, the younger cousin of the dangerous V-2, and soon the world would come to know them as the V-1 Buzz Bomb. They had been produced as a way of

showering the skies over London with flying bombs, the world's first real cruise missiles, and they were arriving much sooner than they did in Fedorov's history. Hitler had Ivan Volkov to thank for that, part of the way he repaid the Führer for the use of all those JU-52 transports he had borrowed for the ill-fated and final raid he made on Ilanskiy. With Volkov's guidance, Germany had been able to produce weaponized prototypes of the V-1 a full eight months sooner.

Plans had been made to launch the craft from special catapult ramps on the French coast, but also to carry them on modified He-111 bombers for air launched attacks that might reach far deeper into British homeland territory. Then Hitler pointed to his two new airships, for he had always envisioned them as long range strategic bombers, and so modifications were made for the great airships to each carry three V-1s.

The Führer had come to realize the futility of ever trying to throw Goring's overstretched Luftwaffe against the British homeland again. The Blitz had been a costly failure in 1941. It had taken 90,000 sorties to deliver a little over 61,000 tons of bombs over a long year in action. That campaign had cost the Luftwaffe the loss of 3000 planes, and 7500 pilots and crewmen on the bombers. They had damaged or destroyed over 1,150,000 structures in England, and caused over 92,000 casualties on the ground.

By contrast, when the V-1 campaign was finally launched in the original history, it flew only a whisker over 8000 sorties, delivering only 14,600 tons, but still damaged or destroyed 1,127,000 structures, almost the same damage score at the Blitz, and all in less than 90 days. The kill ratio of bomb tonnage to casualties was identical at 1.6, and not a single Luftwaffe plane or pilot had been lost.

Strategic missile bombing was therefore a much more dangerous and effective way to strike his enemy, and now Hitler thought he had the means to deliver his wrath from the skies with utter impunity.

The airships could fly so high, over 50,000 feet, that the British Spitfires could not reach them. The Spitfire Mark VB could only reach 36,500 feet, and later models would climb to near 45,000 feet, but those planes had to be specially modified. The American P-38 could reach that height as well, but would still be 6000 feet below the massive airships, which were bristling with AA guns from all those lower gondolas. So Hitler was on to something when he decided to mate his Black Crows with the Zeppelin fleet, and now the first

real combat test would be launched from Odessa.

The target was Novorossiysk, the home of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet. The very existence of that fleet posed a grave threat to any German plans to cross the Kerch Strait for landings on the Taman Peninsula. The Soviet fleet consisted of a single old battleship, still named *Sevastopol* in this retelling of events, with twelve 12-inch guns that could wreak havoc on any troop transport flotilla. There were also five cruisers, three destroyer leaders, fifteen other destroyers and 44 submarines. Numerous mine ships and 84 motor torpedo boats made this fleet a formidable obstacle to any German aspirations in the Black Sea.

Thus far, that fleet had been opposed by no more than six German U-boats, a small group of fast E-Boats, and a few old destroyers taken from the Romanian Navy. Hitler now saw his four Zeppelins as powerful ships at sea, immune to fire from their enemies, but capable of delivering fearful weapons on the attack. He had been both alarmed and fascinated by the use of naval rocketry against ships like the valuable *Graf Zeppelin,* and now he wanted a weapon that could do the same thing to the Soviet fleet at anchor in Novorossiysk.

Operation *Sturmkrähe,* or Stormcrow, was born.

The four great Zeppelins had been modified at the undercarriage of the main airframe between the central and aft gondolas. A kind of trap door was installed, lightly armored, and it would open to allow the cruise missile to slip down a ramp into the air and freefall. A radio command would ignite the engine, and these models were to be radio controlled to attempt to serve as precision strike weapons.

The development of the Fritz-X radio controlled glide bomb was also to be tested in this attack, and those would be carried on the Dornier-217 bomber. In the real history, this weapon had been used to damage the Italian battleship *Italia* after it was captured by the Allies in 1943. It also sank the battleship *Roma*, severely damaged the US cruiser *Savannah* and British cruiser *Uganda,* and put enough hurt on the British battleship *Warspite* to send it to the repair yards for six months.

In development since 1939, Volkov had shepherded the project along for Hitler, and now it was ready. A flight of six Do-217s would be up with the Zeppelins to help launch Germany’s version of Pearl Harbor at Novorossiysk. It was something the Russians never expected. The port had been the target

of traditional German bombers flying from Sevastopol, but when this attack came in, it looked like nothing more than a recon mission. The bombers were seen on the rudimentary Soviet radar, and the airships as well, but then the operator indicated the planes seemed to be turning and retiring.

They had already delivered their ordnance, and now an operator in one of the Zeppelins guiding them in towards the harbor. *Fafnir* had already lowered its launch ramp and had the honors of sending the first three V-1s into action that day. It then descended to a lower altitude to become the guide ship for the six Fritz-X bombs.

The entire forward gondola had been cleared to mount the equipment in the nose area of the ship. There, two rows of operators sat at the viewports, each with a high powered telescopic range finder, and radio controls operated with a small joystick. The first three V-1s would broadcast on a specific frequency, and each one had its own operation to guide it in. Meanwhile, the remaining three Zeppelins dropped their V-1s from a higher altitude at phased intervals, allowing the operators to pick up their signals, with an illuminated yellow light on their equipment indicating the handshake had been made. They would then turn a frequency dial toward the position of that yellow light on a circular display, and that would lock them onto that particular missile. The light would turn red, and the operator could then guide that missile in towards the target area.

On the morning of January 5, 1943, history would be made as these Chariots of Fire fell inexorably towards their targets. Down they came, like the dark crows they were named for, streaking right past the first flight of six La-7 Soviet fighters that had been scrambled on alert. The pilots saw them flash by at over 400 MPH, not knowing what these dark fighters could be. The Do-17s had already turned to run for the protection of German fighters up in escort, so the Soviet pilots had their eyes fixed upwards on the great mass of *Fafnir*. It had descended to under 30,000 feet to control the bombs, which was well within reach of the Soviet fighters.

When they made their approach to *Fafnir*, however, they were suddenly greeted by a hail of gunfire. The German 20mm cannons were mounted on the gondolas, sides, and top platforms of the Zeppelin, and they put out a withering fire. Three of the six planes that made attack runs were blown from the sky. One got in a burst from its own two 20mm guns, the other two were simply driven off by the intense AA fire and dove away, hoping to wait for

more support before trying their attack again.

Meanwhile, the twelve V-1s descended inexorably towards the harbor, where the bulk of that Black Sea Fleet rode at anchor. The Soviet sailors heard the air raid alarm, and they were only just rushing to their action stations when the first three V-1s off the *Fafnir* came in.

Two overflew the harbor and went crashing into the city, sending twin fists of dark smoke rising up when they exploded. The third had been expertly guided, right towards the high mainmast of the light cruiser *Chervona Ukraina.* A near perfect hit, it struck the 8400 ton cruiser right amidships, its 850kg warhead smashing through the superstructure to explode deep within the ship. That was a very heavy blow for a sip to endure, nearly 1900 pounds of explosive Amatol-39. The short range of the attack also saw a lot of that 600 gallon gasoline fuel tank ignite with the blast, and like the Russian missiles that had so plagued the Kriegsmarine, Hitler now had his own flying firebomb to use against enemy ships.

In came the six Fritz-X glide bombs, which had much smaller warheads at 320kgs, but they were all armor piercing. Two would splash harmlessly into the sea, sending wild geysers of seawater up into the morning air. One struck the hull of the destroyer *Bezposhchadny (Merciless),* ripping through to gut the ship with its fire. The fourth hit that same pack of destroyers, moored side by side, and hit the forecastle of *Sposobnyi, (Capable),* killing everyone on the bridge and striking with such force that it plunged right on into the lower compartments, nearly piercing the bottom hull before it exploded. The destroyer's sides were ripped open by the blast and it began to sink.

The last two Fritz glide bombs were near misses on the cruiser mooring station, but now the last nine V-1s were falling in eerie silence, their engines cutting out unexpectedly, even though they remained on target as guided by *Fafnir* above. Down came the black crows, with five smashing into the harbor facilities on land, one striking a main quay, another blasting into a fuel tank farm, a third merely blasting warehouses by the wharves.

Of the last four, two would miss, falling into the bay, but two were on target for the big squat shape of the *Sevastopol*. The first would strike the forward deck, the heavy warhead easily penetrating the 50mm armor and plunging deep into the ship. The explosion sent raging fires right through the open door to the magazine of the forward turret, and there was another large secondary explosion.

The second, and last V-1, plunged into the sea just four feet from the hull, and the explosion was severe enough to buckle the sides of the battleship and send seawater careening in through three shattered hull plates. It was that first hit that had done the real damage, and within ten minutes, *Sevastopol* was down at the bow, shipping water and doomed to go nose first into the silt and mud of the harbor bottom. The long column of heavy smoke billowed up into the clear sky, and the crewmen aboard *Fafnir* cheered with elation.

Now, high above the city, the other three Zeppelins hovered at high altitude. Soon their aft mounted bomb racks opened, and down came a rain of traditional unguided bombs. They might have delivered all of 8000 kilos of bombs, but the 2000kg weight of each of those three V-1s had reduced this final bomb drop to just 2000kg. Yet that was going to send eight 250Kg bombs down from each of the three airships, mostly directed at the harbor area of the city. They had been modified to carry incendiary warheads, and now the whole harbor began to explode with fire, the smoke darkening and thickening as the bombs fell.

It was nowhere near the devastating blow that Japan had delivered at Pearl Harbor, but on that Tuesday morning in the sleepy cold city, it was enough to severely shake the enemy with the shock of what these new weapons could do. The Germans believed they had just announced that turnabout was fair play, unaware that their Soviet enemies had never designed or deployed the devastating naval rockets that had gutted the Graf Zeppelin—at least not in 1943.

So the Germans had the ironic satisfaction of seeing their own aerial Zeppelins deliver vengeance for the carrier that had been named for one of their ancestors. *Fafnir, Fraenir, Asgard* and *Aegir* had struck a fateful blow, sinking *Sevastopol*, damaging the cruiser *Chervona Ukraina* so badly that it was out of the war, and gutting those two destroyers. Hitler was elated when he got the news that his new wonder weapons had actually worked, and when he was handed photo recon images of the burning harbor, he smiled.

Fat Hermann Goring was at his right arm, his baton tucked under one arm, beaming. Hitler turned to him, a fire in his eyes, as if he was seeing something far away, but now so near that he could grasp it in his right hand.

“Build more,” he said. “Double the production budget for your Zeppelin program immediately. I want all the first twelve to be ready for service by June of this year, and another dozen by year’s end. Do you know what this

means, Herr Reichsmarschall? With those Zeppelins I can deliver seventy-two *Sturmkrähe* to the heart of London like one mailed fist, right in Churchill's face. If I can do this to one harbor with only four such ships, imagine what two dozen Zeppelins could do to New York! Build them, as fast as you possibly can."

"I will do so," said Goring. "But there will be an issue with helium. Our supplies are very limited."

"Don't worry about that," said Hitler. "I am told where we can find all the helium you will ever need, and I have already taken steps to secure it. I intend to redouble efforts to secure the Caucasus, so we will get to Maykop and Baku soon. We already have a rail line linking up to Volkov's oil production sites near Astrakhan and the Caspian Basin. But now we will take all the rest."

"All the rest?" Goring raised an eyebrow.

"The oil!" Hitler exclaimed. "That was the whole point of all our Armeegruppe South operations in the first place. I was on to the right idea long ago when I sent troops into Syria, but we were unable to support a large enough force logistically at that time. I have corrected that deficiency. Now I can support *Armeegruppe Irak* over the improved Turkish rail lines, and we are already positioning troops for the invasion."

"Syria? Again?"

"Where else? The first units have already assembled at Aleppo. My Brandenburgers put the light garrison there to flight in a half a day, and the city is ours. Now we move south into Syria, and more, we move east to Irak —to Baba Gurgur, where we can get all the helium we require."

Hitler had his *Amerika Bomber*, and now he was going after the helium and fuel oil he would need to sustain that Zeppelin fleet. Twenty-four this year, he thought, then we double production again next year. I will burn London, New York, and Boston. My Black Crows can fly, and they will wreak havoc when I let them loose over those American cities. They want war with Germany? I will give them one, because there is one more arrow in my quiver that they know nothing about. Yes, that strange ship that *Kaiser Wilhelm* delivered… and so much more….

Part V

Humbugged

“Napoleon has humbugged me, by God; he has gained twenty-four hours' march on me!”

—Arthur Wellesley, 2nd Duke of Wellington
On the occasion of The Dutchess of Richmond’s Ball
15 June, 1815

Chapter 13

Hitler remembered all too well the long discussion he had with Manstein over Raeder's plan to move deep into the Middle East. Manstein had laid out all the possibilities, and the logistic difficulties, as well as the countermoves he expected from the enemy, even before Barbarossa was launched.

"If I were the British commander, I would use Cyrenaica as a defensive buffer, and move as many troops against Syria as possible. Once I eliminate the French there, I secure my right flank, effect a conjunction with Turkey, protect the oil in Iraq and Iran, and open all those lines of communication even into Persia. Where is the largest oil field in the world? Right there in Iraq at Baba Gurgur near Kirkuk. That is what the British wish to hold, or at the very least deny us access. Where else can Britain operate? They certainly won't invade Portugal any time soon, or attempt any campaign against French West Africa. Your buildup in Libya will prevent them from entering Tripolitania. So they will have no choice but to operate as I describe, and seize Syria and Irak before the notion to do so enters our minds."

That notion finally did enter the Führer's mind, yet his initial invasion had been countered exactly as Manstein said it would happen. The British Operation Scimitar had been decisive, delivering Damascus and Beirut to the British, and largely destroying the Vichy French forces in Syria. The Germans held on in northern Syria, where the British simply kept a guarded watch, not expecting any further developments after the two German mobile divisions were withdrawn for Operation Barbarossa. Now Manstein's words echoed again in the Führer's mind…

"This is a bold and imaginative plan," he said, speaking of the German movement into Syria. "It would augment the southern emphasis for Barbarossa very well. Yet would even this knock Great Britain out of the war? I do not believe so. It may knock them out of the Middle East, but they will continue to fight on. The British Empire would still have strong outposts in India and the far east. Taking Egypt would be a severe setback, but they will fight on no matter what, and wait for the Americans to get involved. Then we will be moving troops west again, because instead of us planning to invade England as we should have in 1941, they will be planning to invade

French colonies in West Africa, or even France itself. You see, my Führer, Ivan Volkov is not the only man who can make predictions."

Manstein had been completely correct. The Allies did invade West Africa, and Portugal as well. They had overthrown Franco, toppled the Spanish Government and set up a puppet state there. They had retaken the prize Hitler won with Operation Felix, recapturing Gibraltar. They had driven the Germans out of the Canary Islands, foiling Operation Condor, seizing all of Morocco, and most of Algeria. Germany had been forced to disarm the remaining Vichy French forces in North Africa, and send an entire new army there under von Arnim.

Yet if he returned to the strategy that had been foiled by Operation Scimitar, he might accomplish a great deal now. He could force the British 8th Army to halt its offensive towards Tripoli, looking over its shoulder at the new threat Operation Phoenix posed. He would prevent any further possibility that Turkey would fall under Churchill's spell. He would pose a grave threat to British oil supplies and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq, and also to Palestine and Egypt, forcing the enemy to defend ground it now held with rear area formations.

And he would get to the oil—to Baba Gurgur near Kirkuk. That goal was uppermost in his mind. The locals referred to the place as the "Father of Fires," where low smoldering flames had been burning in a small crater for centuries. In 1927, when a gaggle of geologists were summoned from all over the world, it became one of the first major gushers in the region when drilled, emitting a tall geyser of black oil over 140 feet high that drenched the derrick and surrounding area in an evil black rain. The well was capped after gushing over 95,000 barrels per day, disaster was averted, and the geologists had tamed the demon that would both feed and haunt an energy hungry world for the next hundred years, the "Age of Oil."

By 1941, Baba Gurgur was considered the single largest reserve of oil on the planet, as the mighty Ghawar fields of Saudi Arabia would not be discovered until 1948. Ivan Volkov would claim he sat on vast resources in the Kashagan fields of the north Caspian Sea, but none of that had been developed as yet. The British, however, were quick to the tap, and soon pipelines extended from oil fields northwest of Kirkuk, through Iraq to Haditha, where the lines split, one transiting northern Syria to Tripoli, and a second flowing through the Trans Jordan to Haifa in Palestine. They also had

seized Abadan in Iran and controlled all the oil in the northern Persian Gulf.

The pipelines that crossed those parched deserts were the life lines of the British war effort. Hitler reasoned that he did not have to kill Britain if he could choke it into submission. Doenitz was doing his best in the Atlantic with the U-boat campaign, but now Hitler believed that a truly serious commitment to Operation Phoenix could yield much more than his fruitless obsession with a place like Volgograd.

I had to commit ten divisions to take that single city, he thought, and all to control the commercial traffic on that river. Yes, I removed it as a source of supply and manufacturing. My troops are sitting right outside their factories even now, but what good did it do me? Perhaps, in six months when the lines of communication to Volkov have been secured, that battle might be worth the cost, but look what I can do now with ten divisions in the Middle East!

The British have pipelines and pumping stations all over those deserts. They have long been considered trophies of war for whoever could secure and control them, but why not simply go to the source itself, the Father of Fires, Baba Gurgur? On the 9th of January it would all begin again….

* * *

Lieutenant Hans Gruber was well out in front of the division, as he should be, for he now led the Brandenburg Reconnaissance Battalion. He had taken over the battalion from Hauptmann Beck when the division underwent conversion to a fast motorized force. Beck had led it with armored cars, and there were still a few attached to the battalion. Now Gruber would lead with light motorcycle troops, though they were backed up with a good mix of other vehicles and equipment.

Gruber had three 88s mounted on halftracks, sixteen SdKfz 231-8 armored cars, and another twelve of the lighter 221s. He also had three Pak 47mm guns on a mobile chassis, three mobile 20mm flak guns, nine Kubelwagons, and other support vehicles and trucks. Half his infantry would ride the motorcycles, the other half would deploy in those trucks, and he could build two heavy companies by dividing up all those vehicles between the two infantry groups, giving him a little more flexibility.

The division had pulled out of the fighting near Volgograd long ago, moving to help stop the big Soviet offensive aimed at Kursk. It had been instrumental in stopping the enemy’s left pincer, holding the river line of the

Donets at Stary Oskol east of Prokhorovka to keep the lines of communication open to Model's 2nd Panzerarmee. Yet look where he was now!

A young man at just 24 years, he was tall, powerfully built, and every bit the Aryan warrior that he looked, a blonde haired statue of a man, with flashing blue eyes.

Hitler finally came to his senses, he thought, though that remains to be seen. I was as surprised as everyone else to hear we were pulling out again. Hitler finally gave Model permission to abandon Voronezh and with draw, and that freed up all those divisions to hold a much shorter line.

Of course it will also free up the Soviet units that were forming the pocket Model was in, but I don't think they have any more fight in them. The arrival of Steiner's Korps was the key, and getting all those units out of that hell hole at Volgograd was essential, Manstein is not stupid. He never wanted Steiner to push for that city, and it was only circumstances that forced him to do so. Now Steiner's units will get a little rest, and we go south. That was good news, but I had no idea just how far south we would end up!

It will be much warmer here, he thought. January overnight lows might reach 32 degrees Fahrenheit, and perhaps 55 degrees by day. That is a paradise compared to what the troops will endure in Russia this winter. But they say it is the rainy season now, from December through March. In the summer we get to feel like Rommel's desert troops, but until then, the weather here gets progressively better week by week.

He raised his field glasses, surveying the dry terrain to the east and west. The long thin road led due south from Aleppo, where the bulk of the division was cleaning up the last pockets of local resistance and getting ready to form regimental shock columns to begin Operation Phoenix.

The Brandenburg Division was now a large Motorized Division with a massive structure. While the typical German Motorized Infantry Division would consist of two Motorized Regiments, this division had four, part of the restructuring at Volgograd where it gave up its armor and converted to an infantry formation for the street fighting. When it did so, it increased in size dramatically with the infantry components, and now, as a special addition for this operation, it had a fifth regiment attached, the Lehr Regiment Brandenburg, which was a fast moving scouting unit for general reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. Many of the elite commandos that

had been the root of the division long ago were assigned to that unit, and Gruber operated closely with them now.

The Lehr Regiment had the Abwehr Stamm Battalion, a special unit charged with interfacing with the local tribes in this region, recruiting and gathering intelligence. Then there were two Legionärs Battalions, their ranks filled with former members of the Vichy French Foreign Legion that had remained loyal to Germany after the debacle the British inflicted on their cause in Syria with Operation Scimitar. All these men had specialized skills, some Kommandos, others language specialists, mountaineers, and some with para jump training.

When fully assembled, the division had more than twice the strength of two German Motorized Divisions, including one battalion of Panzerjaegers that had mobile 88s, six Nashorns, and twelve of the latest model Panther tanks that came off the production lines. Hitler had lavished the pick of all the best equipment on these elite troops, and they would be his spearhead leading the attack east towards Iraq, and the distant allure of all those oil fields.

The man in charge of the Division was General Beckerman, a Zombie if professor Dorland would have ever tried to look him up. Something in the long chain of causality between 1908 and 1943 had twisted to give birth to the man, though he had never been born in the real history. Zombie or not, Beckermann was well suited to the task. He had come up through the ranks of the Brandenburg Kommandos, conducting raids all over Persia in 1941, and he had also spent the last year of the war in Russia, in some of the most intense combat on the front. He was a fighter, but also a master of the art of maneuver, and he would get on very well with Army Commander Heinz Guderian.

I am told the General is riding with 3rd Panzer Division, he thought. They were pretty worn down with all the fighting Model put them through, but lo and behold, we find all new equipment waiting for us at Odessa, not to mention those four big Zeppelins hovering over the city. It is hard to believe that they will be part of our mission here, as they seem such a throwback to the last war. Yet they may be useful in a reconnaissance role, and for delivery of needed supplies and ammunition to forward units.

I intend to be one of those units, the tip of the spear. There is a lot of ground out here, plenty of room to maneuver, though very few good roads. So I may have to do a little cross country running. We’re going to take the

division east to Raqqah, and then follow the line of the Euphrates River south. That's a distance of nearly 300 miles to the Iraqi border, and then another 200 miles to Baghdad if we take that route. Who knows, General Beckermann may take us further east. I am told the Führer wants Mosul, and Kirkuk as well. Yes, the Führer wants all that oil, but what will he do if he ever gets his hands on it?

The British have crisscrossed this desert with pipelines, but they end at Tripoli and Haifa. I don't think our ships will be making regular calls on those ports, so these pipelines will be of limited use. I studied the map well last night. The northern line runs from Haditha on the Euphrates through the central town of Palmyra. I think we must have that. If we can use those pipelines to pump the oil that far, then moving it north to Aleppo shouldn't be all that difficult, and from there it goes by rail through Ankara and Istanbul and right into Bulgaria for distribution to the Reich. That's what this is really all about—the oil.

First things first…. I need to get south and scout out this road and rail line to Hamah. 10th Motorized and 3rd Panzer will be to the west on the main road. Once we take that, then Homs is the next objective in the south, and Palmyra is about 90 miles due east of that. I want to be there in a week.

Gruber leaned forward and rapped his gloved hand on the armor of his 321-8, signaling the driver to move on. We caught them completely by surprise, he thought, but now they damn well know we are here. It remains to be seen what they can try to do to stop us here, but if Rommel's experience is any guide, the British will be tenacious fighters.

His column moved out, and not five kilometers further down the road there came the pop of small mortar fire. Most likely a delaying force, he thought. And reached for his radio handset to report the blocking force and bring up his armored cars.

Chapter 14

The British had indeed been taken by surprise. Bletchley Park picked up the movements of the Brandenburg Division as far as Odessa, and took particular interest in the reports that came in on the Zeppelin attack on Novorossiysk. When the Germans stormed the Crimea, the Soviets fought like hellcats against Volkov's troops to take that city and its port. They needed a haven for their Black Sea Fleet, and that was the only good port that still remained under Soviet control.

"Damn irregular," said Alan Turing to Peter Twinn as they were looking over the intelligence intercepts. "The Russians tell us they were attacked by some kind of rocket propelled bombs, and they said they were very accurate."

"I don't see why they should be at all surprised," said Twinn. "After all, they invented the damn things."

"Indeed," said Turing. "But now the Germans seem to have them. I think we'd better have a look at the material we gathered on this facility at Peenemünde. That may have something to do with the German R&D on these weapons."

"Say, where's that Russian ship that was all chummy with Admiral Tovey?" asked Twinn.

"In the Pacific," said Turing.

"Drat. We might ask them about that facility. It seems they've been a fairly reliable source of good intelligence in the past."

Twinn was "in the know" concerning the Russian ship and crew, and he was suggesting that they could save them a good deal of time by simply spilling the beans about Peenemünde. Fedorov had been reluctant to say too much, knowing he had to let the men of this era find their way forward, groping like blind men in the dark. He was the man with the flashlight, but there were others, equally bright and capable, and men like Turing and Twinn were perfect examples.

A key figure at Bletchley Park, Alan Turing had been aware of the real nature of *Kirov* for a good long time. This man was not quite the same one who had first gone to the Admiralty, and found a sympathetic ear with Admiral Tovey. That man had been instrumental in solving the riddle of how

Kirov must have moved in time, for it had vanished off St. Helena one day, and was then seen off the coast of Australia 24 hours later, a distance impossible to traverse through space alone, unless the ship could fly. *Kirov* could not fly, but it suddenly seemed to Turing that it could do something even more amazing—it could move in *time*.

He had been one of the founding fathers of the group that came to be called the Watch, marking the amazing disappearance and reappearance of this mysterious ship that they came to call 'Geronimo.' Yet well before he ever remembered doing any of that, he remembered having a conversation with Peter Twinn, very much like this one.

It was June of 1940, a long year before those dogged memories of the time he first became aware of *Kirov* in 1941. That is why they simply couldn't be real, or so he believed. Because in June of 1940, Twinn had come to him with a mystery wrapped in a plain manila envelope, and he remembered it very clearly. Unlike those other memories of Geronimo, this one still fit nicely into the chronology of his present life. Now he played it all out again in his mind. Twinn had come in, that envelope in hand….

"What is it?" Turing seemed uninterested.

"It's the prodigal son, that's what it is." Twinn pressed the photographs into his lap.

Turing took the first photo, eying it suspiciously. It was a typical aerial reconnaissance photo of what appeared to be a large warship at sea. "Well it certainly is exactly what it looks like," he said. "A ship."

"Yes, but not a German ship this time, Alan. Take a good guess as to who owns this one. Then have a look at these close-ups under my arm. I think you'll be quite amazed."

Turing set down his coffee mug, reached for his magnifying glass, and took a closer look. "Russian naval ensign," he said definitively. "That's clear enough. Where was it taken—the Baltic?"

"Southwest of Iceland, right in the middle of this big operation underway out there now."

Turing looked again, this time his gaze lingering on the photo, eye roving from place to place behind the big round lens of the magnifying glass, and a strange feeling coming over him that he could not quite decipher. It was an odd ripple, shiver like, that ran up his spine and tingled at the back of his neck, yet he could not see why he would react this way to a simple

photograph.

Saying nothing, Turing extended an arm, gesturing for the manila envelope Twinn was holding, his eyes still riveted to the original photo, a furrow of growing concern creasing his brow. *He had seen this ship before…* That was the feeling at the back of his neck now, and it was bloody dangerous, a rising discomfort and warning alarm in his mind. *He had seen this ship before*, yet he could not recall the where and when of that, strangely bothered, as his mind was a trap that little escaped from once embraced by the cold steel of his logic.

At that time, none of the odd memories of *Kirov* had any place in his mind. Instead, they were ghostly feelings, worrisome notions, foreboding thoughts he had difficulty explaining. They all conspired to create one thing—fear, an apprehension that he could just not explain away. Then he found that box in the archives, and his whole world seemed to be turned on its head, or worse. It was folded back on itself, all twisted and out of shape. That box contained hard evidence of the very same Russian ship Twinn brought to him that day, photographs, reports, things initialed by his own hand, and that of Admiral Tovey, yet he was shocked to find they had all been dated a year in the future. It was August of 1940 when he found that box, and everything in it chronicled events that transpired between August of 1941 and August of 1942!

He presented them all to the Admiral, and that was the first time he had ever met the man—he was sure of that. Yet everything in that box argued that was not the case. It was evidence that both he and Tovey had been thick as thieves, in the know about this Russian ship all along, a nice little conspiracy…. *But in the future!*

That’s when the fears and odd apprehensions began emerging with more clarity in his mind, as if they were old lost memories. Yet they could not be recollections, he reasoned, for they were all about months and days dated to a future time. He worried that when the calendar of his present life finally reached the first of them, in August of 1941, that they would all begin to happen in real life, but he was wrong. *Kirov* never went to battle in the Atlantic with the Royal Navy as those files and reports showed. It was all rubbish, and he simply could not understand how he could have ever accumulated all that material. The files claimed the ship had first been

spotted in August of 1941, when he knew damn well they encountered it a full year earlier.

Then, strangely, the Russian ship vanished in the heat of that battle with the Germans west of Gibraltar in the Atlantic, and it wasn't seen again for two full months, in August of 1941….

A second coming, he thought. It was arriving just as he had it in all those old memories; *just as he had written it up in those reports in the file box!* He was possessed with a moment of sudden fear that the ship would turn for the Denmark Strait and become the deadly foe it had been as written in those reports. Then, to his great surprise, he learned it went north instead, to Murmansk.

After that, all his memories of those earlier events in 1941 began to seem very hazy, like an underpainting being slowly covered over as the painter started to creating something new on that same old canvass. He still had them in his head, but when he thought about them, he could no longer mate them up with any sense that he had actually lived them out. When *Kirov* came that second time, it turned north to Murmansk instead of south to the Denmark Strait, and that single decision had begun to rewrite all the history that Turing had lived through and written about.

Deep in his mind, he still had recollections of huddling with Tovey as the two men worked to solve the puzzle of this mysterious ship… but after the second coming, that had never happened! The memories seemed so real that he would swear he lived them out, but he could not fit them into the chronology of his life. They were so real that he had spent long hours writing up an account of them, which he filed away in a simple box he kept in the archives at Bletchley Park.

In time, all those memories would recede to the background of his mind, like that old file box hidden away under a stack of three others in the archives. The memories would fade, then become unaccountable feelings, hunches, strange fragments of things he could no longer grasp and see clearly. While some men had to slowly awaken to those old memories of an earlier life, others had to forget….

He shook himself, returning to the moment at hand. There was Peter Twinn, and the two of them had yet another mystery to solve, this time involving the German troop movements.

"Anything else of note?" asked Turing, eyeing his empty coffee mug.

“Just the usual—troop movements and such. Jerry gave the Russians Voronezh back. They’ve pulled Model out of that pocket, so a lot of divisions are moving about in the snow over there.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Steiner has pulled back to Kharkov… Let’s see… Ah, the Brandenburgers went there too, but this latest report had them on the trains heading south to Odessa. What in the world would they be doing there? Probably getting a refit.”

“Odessa?” Turing sat up. “What about those Zeppelins?”

“What about them?”

“They staged out of Odessa, and they’re still there now.”

Twinn had retrieved the coffee pot and now he leaned in over Turing’s right shoulder and filled his mug. “My good man,” he said. “What are you suggesting?”

“That’s an elite unit. It was at Volgograd, and in this big row over Kursk. The Germans just staged a rather dramatic attack out of Odessa, and now it shows up there.”

“We did have that information that a lot of new equipment was moving there. Wasn’t that unit a Panzer Division? Perhaps they mean to flesh it out again.”

“Perhaps…. But didn’t they pull part of Model’s force out and send it south? Didn’t 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions move right on through Kharkov and continue on south?”

“The last report we have on them puts the two of them at Dnipropetrovsk. That’s been their big refit and replenish base for units they rotate in and out of Army Group South.”

“Yes…” said Turing, thinking.

“This business about Halder being replaced is something new,” said Twinn. “We’ve finally identified the new appointee—it’s Zeitzler. Here’s the file on him.” He handed Turing a plain manila folder with the usual profile, photograph, bio, and noted capabilities based on his past assignments.

“Ah,” said Turing. “He’s a chess player, and he likes to develop early.” He read from the brief: “‘Noted ability to manage and move large mobile formations at the Korps or Army level. Former Chief of Staff for the 1st Panzer Army under von Kleist. Managed the move of German forces through Ardennes region for Case Yellow.’ That was *Fall Gelb*, the invasion of

France. Well, he certainly buggered us good with that one, didn't he? Then he led 1st Panzer Armee as part of Army Group South, right through the Ukraine to the Black Sea coast. He took Kiev… crossed the Dnieper… 'Demonstrated exceptional ability to maintain pace of operations and move supply to forward units.' So the man is a logistical wizard. Yet this new appointment is a bit surprising. Hitler had to pass over Jodl, Kleist and Keitel to hand him the baton at OKW. I don't like it. Wasn't Hitler at Kiev last week?"

"We thought as much, but it was never confirmed. They move those armored trains he uses about like they were playing a shell game."

"I'll bet he was there," said Turing. "Because Manstein was there. We know that from that radio intercept we picked apart two weeks ago. I'm willing to bet the two of them had a nice long chat, and now look at all these developments. Peter, the pot is stirring. We'd better grab our bowls and spoons and get a taste before they serve it all up! So that Brandenburg Division went to Odessa…. You might be right. They may be rebuilding it as a Panzer Division again. After all, once you've worn a Tux you never feel quite the same in that old tweed coat again."

"No," said Twinn, looking over the next page. "Here's the latest… Lightfoot just tattled that it was being put on the trains again." That was a code name for a special agent in place. And Twinn's latest pronouncement raised Turing's hackles.

"So soon? Then it was no beach party on the Black Sea coast for them after all. I don't like it. If they moved that unit to Odessa for any other reason, then it's making a major redeployment, not simply a refit. Now where could they be going…." He reached for a map. "Everything else they move through Odessa either ends up in Greece or Italy. Could they be trying to reinforce their position at Tunis?"

"That's a far leap, isn't it?" Twinn suggested.

"Perhaps, but if they take the line through Bucharest to Sofia, then they can get over to the Albanian coast easily, and from there it's just a short hop to Bari and then just 40 miles overland to all that Italian shipping at Taranto. That gives them a ticket to either Tripoli or Tunis, and a whole lot of trouble for either front when they arrive. You know… This movement of the 15th Infantry Division into the port of Toulon might figure into this. Word is that the Germans have pulled Falschirmjaegers off the line there. That gets me

very nervous."

"They've been fighting in Algeria since we chased them away from the Canaries," said Twinn. "Those cats must be very tired. Perhaps they just need a rest."

"Perhaps…" The interval of silence after that always meant that Turing was rotating tumblers in his mind, sorting through reams of data that had come through his desk, assessing, analyzing, considering. He looked up at Twinn, a searching expression on his face. "Rolling stock," he said. "We know where their shipping assets are to enable a move for a big division like the Brandenburgers by sea. Where's the rolling stock to move it over land?"

"Just a moment…." Twinn went over to his desk. "Here it is… 57 cars out of Vienna through Budapest to Sophia. Another 40 a day later."

"That's a big move," said Turing, "but most everything has been going to Kiev from there. This smells odd, doesn't it? Why Sophia?"

"Well Alan, you just had the Brandenburgers headed that way in your head a moment ago, didn't you?"

"Sophia is the hub of a wheel," said Turing, still working all this out in his mind. "From there they can move to the Albanian coast as I've suggested, or south to Athens, southeast to Istanbul or back up through Bucharest to Odessa. Those trains are for the Brandenburgers, that much is clear."

"Why do you say that?" asked Twinn.

"Because they'll drop off those bastards at Sophia, then send that stock back to Odessa. They'll need new rolling stock for them to go anywhere else. So then… We'll want to get a quiet tweet off to Mockingbird. He'll solve this puzzle for us, won't he?"

That was another agent in place in Bulgaria, and they could ask him to verify the movement of the Brandenburgers once and for all—assuming they did go southwest to Sophia as Turing was suggesting.

"Mockingbird," said Twinn. "Yes I read his file yesterday. Fairly hum drum."

"Look at it again," said Turing, his voice climbing a rope as if he were on to something.

Twinn produced the file, and smiled. "My, my, it is hum drum stuff indeed, but not to you, my dear Alan. He says the Orpo showed up in force there at Sophia the day after Christmas." That was the German's organic police force, short for the *Ordnungspolizei.* They often worked in close

cooperation with the Army when a big move was underway, particularly in rear areas like this. These units, sometimes called the *Grüne Polizei*, or 'Green Police' because of their uniforms, took on wide ranging responsibilities: highway patrols, escort for high ranking officers and officials, city police, coast watchers, fire brigades, night watchmen, bridge security.

"Yes," Twinn continued. "Mockingbird says the Greens showed up in force. Lots of Te-No troops, *Funkschutz* and *Bahnshutz* men." The Te-No troops were men from the *Technische Nothilfe*, translating as 'Technical Emergency Aid'. It was an engineering Korps over 100,000 strong that was often used for public works, road improvement, and railroad construction. The *Funkschutz* were troops specializing in radio security for installations and overall transmission integrity. It was also their job to ferret out men like Mockingbird who might be transmitting information to the enemy. The *Bahnshutz* men were railway police.

Turing nodded, a light dawning in his eyes. "Does he indicate where any of these men went after they arrived at Sophia?"

"Right you are, Turing," said Twinn, finally pulling on the same rope that Turing had been climbing in his mind these last few minutes. "A few moved into Serbia, and he mentioned the SS Prinz-Eugen Division was getting marching orders there. Others posted to 12th Army—that's the reserve Army covering Greece, Albania and the Turkish border. It looks like a good many were seen passing through Haskovo. Mockingbird has a lady friend there."

"I see," said Turing, overlooking the impropriety. Yet everything he had heard served only to feed a growing sense of alarm in his mind, and now it was accompanied by that feeling of restless anticipation, tinged by trepidation, for he sensed that something very big was underway here, and had been underway for some time, right beneath the noses of men like Mockingbird and Lightfoot. They'd been sending in the pieces of the puzzle, in all those hum drum reports that ended up on the desks of Turing and Twinn for passing review. They were the last sieve in the layered filters that sifted through all this intelligence, and for a very good reason. They connected the dots like few others ever could.

"So," said Turing, ready to make his move at last as he eyed the chessboard in his mind. "Halder is out, Zeitzler in, and he specializes in mass formation movement and logistics. Hitler gives up Voronezh to free up all of

Model's troops. Then the Brandenburgers leave Odessa for Sophia, and all the Greens show up there to have a nice little party when that rolling stock arrives for them. The SS Prinz-Eugen Mountain Division comes up to join them from Serbia… So I don't think the Brandenburgers are going there—not to the Albanian coast, and not to Tunis or Tripoli. Follow the Greens," he concluded.

"Haskovo," said Twinn. "They went through Haskovo. Where exactly is that?"

Turing was already squinting at his map, his eye enlarged immensely through the magnifying glass he often used. Twinn saw that eye blink, then it seemed a light kindled there, and Turing set down his glass and looked up at him, a look of astonishment on his face. "It's forty miles from the Turkish border…. Twinn, the bloody Brandenburgers are moving to Istanbul! And that SS unit is going right along with them."

"Hold on," said Twinn. "We can't say that for sure yet. They might simply be replacing that SS unit."

"No," said Turing flatly. "You don't post a unit like the Brandenburgers to a backwater area like Serbia. Now why do they need mountain troops? And didn't they also pull that regiment of 1st Mountain Division out of Algeria ten days ago?"

"Right you are," said Twinn. "It moved out with the 7th Flieger Division when they replaced those troops with 15th Infantry from Toulon."

"You mean 1st Falschirmjaeger Division," said Turing. "They've renamed it, and they've also brewed up a second parachute division to finish off that pair of boots. It's been forming in France, and I'm willing to bet some of those units may have marching orders as well. They pulled the 22nd Luftland out of Algeria right along with them, and by god, they've been moving transport planes to Athens—that was in the batch last week, but we thought it was for air supply runs into Tripoli."

"That still may be so," said Twinn.

"No… No… I don't like this. These are all crack units," said Turing. "These are elite shock troops, and they also moved the 78th Sturm Division to Cyprus two weeks ago."

" It just relieved another division there."

"So we believed," said Turing, snapping his fingers. "But a Sturm Division? The Brandenburgers are moving into Turkey—that's what all that

rolling stock out of Vienna was for. If that's the case, then they could only be going one place—Syria!"

Twinn gave him a surprised look.

"Syria? That was all settled in late 1941."

"So we believed," said Turing, more and more convinced that he was correct in his assessment. "There's no way they move a division like the Brandenburgers into Turkey without a very good reason. What is the damn thing, a nice fat Motorized Infantry Division. And what about all that new equipment that went to Odessa? It wasn't for them, because they moved right on to Sophia to meet the Greens and hop trains to Istanbul. So who gets all those nice new tanks and APCs?"

"The Panzers," said Twinn, the rope Turing had been climbing right around his neck now, and feeling very tight. "Model's Panzers! 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions! I'm willing to bet they won't stay on the Dnieper very long. They'll go to Odessa to pick up all that new equipment. My god, Turing, could they be planning a big push into Syria with all these units? Could they be opening up an entire new front?"

"No," said Turing. "They're just revisiting an old one, only this time, it looks like they mean business. We'd better get all this off to Wavell, and I mean right now!"

Chapter 15

Wavell was taking the new intelligence with a grain of salt. He had a hard time convincing himself that the Germans would want to revisit their aspirations in Syria. They had been content to sit there, holding on to a tiny slice of northern Syria, the port of Latakia, and inland as far as the stony highlands that ran down through the old fortress at Masyaf. That outpost was in British hands now, and General Quinan's 10th Army, officially designated the Persia and Iraq Force, or PAI Force was keeping a watch on them with the 5th Infantry Division.

The British had been obsessed with all the planning on both ends of the German position in Algeria and Tunisia. They were getting ready to kick off their twin offensives aimed at Tripoli and Tunis, so the last thing Wavell wanted to hear about was another frontier he had to worry about.

"What do you make of this?" he said to his able Chief of Staff, Sir Claude Auchinleck, simply called "The Auk" by most in these meetings.

"German movement of mobile and mountain troops to Turkey," said Auchinleck. "Not very sporting of them. Bletchley Park is all up in arms about it. That mountain division doesn't surprise me. They've had Todt organization troops working that rail line through Ankara for a year, and trouble with local tribes. Perhaps it's just a rail security posting."

"That makes sense for the SS unit," said Wavell, "but not these other chaps. That's the Brandenburg Division; top drawer. If this is right we'd better have a look up north and see where they might be headed."

They did have a look, sending RAF long range recon photo units into Turkish airspace at the risk of ruffling a few diplomatic feathers. Britain had been courting Turkey again for some time, trying to woo that wayward bride back into the Allied camp. They didn't like the idea of German troops working those rail lines, but could see no other threatening movement with regards to Turkey underway. The Germans had no combat units in Turkey, though they did have 12th Army units along the border northwest of Istanbul.

On January 5th, even as the Germans mounted that daring raid on Novorossiysk, the recon mission produced a set of photographs that vindicated everything Bletchley Park was asserting. Wavell got them in time

to get word to General Quinan to buck up his troops and see about strengthening the garrison at Aleppo on the southern Turkish frontier—just in case. Receiving the news on the 7th, Quinan was slow to react, equally unwilling to believe that the Germans would be returning to this front in force.

Two days later, the Brandenburg Division had leapt from the trains at the Turkish city of Gaziantep, and moved swiftly south to cross the border. The rail lines through Turkey were heating up, and on the 9th of January, the Germans stormed into Aleppo, routing the thin garrison troops there, mostly border guard units formed from local cadres of sympathetic Syrian troops. That move sent a shock all through the lines of communication in Wavell's Middle Eastern Command.

"By God," he said to Auchinleck when the two men met again on the 10th. Sounding like Wellington on the eve of Waterloo he summed it all up. "The Germans have humbugged us! Bletchley Park had it right five days ago, but we were too bloody thick to believe it. This isn't likely intended as a new holding force. If they wanted to beef up that frontier, they'd simply send an infantry division. No, these are fast moving motorized troops, and that means they've got mischief on their minds. Has General Quinan got things sorted out yet?"

"He's put the 5th Infantry on full alert, and ponied up a brigade from the 56th to move east to Homs if the Germans do push south."

"Bet on that," said Wavell, quite upset with these developments. "And here we get this nonsense right on the eve of those two big operations teeing off with O'Connor and Montgomery. I'd better let O'Connor know about this straight away. We might end up having to pick his pocket."

"You mean to pull in a division from his reserve?"

"If we have to. We've got the 46th Infantry due in from the Kingdom on the 17th. That unit was supposed to go to O'Connor, but it looks like we'll have to divert it to Palestine now. And there's more in this porridge than I'd like to spoon up right now. This bit about the 7th Flieger Corps is somewhat unnerving. Those are the lads Student took into the Canary Islands. They were holding the line opposite Monty—until they were pulled out two weeks ago and replaced by the 15th Infantry. This has got trouble written all over it."

"Agreed," said Auchinlek. "We'd better look out for Crete. I wouldn't put

it past those rascals to make a move there. We know they had plans to do so last year, but then again, they might just be resting those parachute units."

Wavell stroked his chin. "I'm not so sure. I think we should get hold of General Browning with our own 1st Paras. Brigadier Flavell has 1st Brigade in North Africa looking over a drop on Bone in conjunction with Montgomery's attack. He was going to put Johnny Frost's battalion on Pont du Fahs. Ernie Down has 2nd Brigade behind Monty as well. We might need them both."

"Picking Monty's pocket too," said Auchinleck. "Fair enough."

"My real worry is armor," said Wavell. "This Brandenburg unit converted to motorized infantry. Well enough, but what if we end up getting a bloody Panzer Division in this mix up north."

"Aren't they at their wits end in Russia?"

"True, but all it would take is one good division there to really upset the apple cart."

"Well," said Auk, "we've got 31st Indian Armored Division training at Damascus."

"And that's all we have at the moment, at least until the 46th Division arrives on the 17th. The 31st didn't even have any tanks until very recently, and now they've got those American jobs, one regiment light, a second medium. Yet they've barely had time to train with that equipment, and no real experience fighting as an armored division. Thinking of them going up against a German Panzer Division gives me the willies right now."

"But they're all we've got in the cupboard," said Auchinleck. "The 46th is just more infantry. So we may have to pull an armored brigade from O'Connor, and he won't like that one bit—not at all."

"Not quite," said Wavell. "The 46th Infantry is a Mixed Division, just like the troops laid out for the invasion at Lisbon. They were going to switch it back to all infantry, but they haven't done that yet, the War Office was too slow about it, and thank god for that. The 137th Brigade is still armored, so we're in luck."

If only we still had Kinlan and the Heavies, thought Wavell, though he said nothing of that to the Auk. There was no use stirring that pot. Both Auchinleck and Alexander had been briefed on the existence of the Heavy Brigade, but not told anything of its real identity and origin. Being staff officers operating from the headquarters at Alexandria, neither man had ever

really seen the new tanks and vehicles, though Alexander got a look at the little detachment Reeves led to Mersa Matruh when he was there on a railhead inspection tour. He raised more than a few questions with Wavell about what he had seen, but the senior officer just fixed him with a firm stare from that one good eye of his and quietly said, “General, I think it best if nothing more is said about that matter, nothing more at all.”

The Heavies would have solved this problem easily enough, but now they were gone. Britain had to stand or fall on the sweat of the great, great grandfathers of those men, and Wavell never said anything else about the other odd occurrences surrounding Kinlan’s Brigade. He had been losing men —strangely, unaccountably, and in a way that sent a shiver down Wavell’s spine. The General wished he had those Russian officers to chew on the matter with them, but they were all gone, one killed in that gallant action aboard HMS *Invincible*, and the other was in the Pacific.

Kinlan had been losing men, but not to illness or enemy action. They would be going about their business, out on routine patrol or milling about the secret laager where they were segregated from the regular army, and then a man would go missing, with no explanation whatsoever. Wavell thought deeply about that, and a frightful notion came to him. Those men were the great, great grandsons of the men he now commanded in these armies. Those troops were fighting, and some of those grandfathers had been killed in action…. That might have rippled right on through the tree, like a dark cold wind, and knocked off an apple or two. It was all he could think of, and it gave him the shivers.

Then the whole bloody brigade went up in smoke at Tobruk, and that had struck him like a hammer. Everyone in the know had been shaken by that, not understanding what could have happened to cause such a catastrophic explosion. Yes they had ammo ships and tankers there, but when Wavell had gone to look over the scene after that event, the devastation had been frightening. It was certainly not cause by an ammo dump going off, but that was not to be the official line, and any man who question it was grilled.

Yes, the Heavies were gone, and yet that fired a grim determination in Wavell’s mind. They had to hold on here now, and they *could* hold on. They were on the move at last, on the attack, and O’Connor had Rommel’s back to Tripoli, ready to push on to take that vital port and kick him right out of Libya once and for all. Now Wavell might need experienced men from the

Armored Corps if the Germans meant business up north, and O'Connor had the only troops he could reach for.

"Auk," he said. "I think we'd best notify the Indian Divisions in Iraq to get ready to move. We may have more on our hands here than we realize."

"The 5th is up north at Baba Gurgur, the others are around Baghdad, Basrah and Abadan. Let's hope they still have adequate transport. But who will mind the oil fields if we pull those troops out?"

"We'll do so as a last measure," said Wavell. "If need be, we can see about picking O'Connor's pocket—perhaps one of the South African Divisions could be spared, though we may have to ask him for armor soon. That will all depend on the situation as it develops over the next week. For now, we're going to have a long hard day's work ahead of us."

BRITISH 10th ARMY – SYRIA – General Sir Edward Quinan
5th Infantry Division, Major-General Horatio Berney-Ficklin
13th Infantry Brigade - Brigadier V.C. Russell
15th Infantry Brigade - Brigadier H.R.N. Greenfield
17th Infantry Brigade - Brigadier G.W.B. Tarleton
56th (London) Infantry Division, Major-General Eric Miles
167th (London) Infantry Brigade - Brigadier J.C.A. Birch
168th (London) Infantry Brigade - Brigadier K.C. Davidson
169th (London) Infantry Brigade - Brigadier L.O. Lyne
31st Indian Armored Div - Major-General Robert Wordsworth
3rd Indian Motor Brigade - Brigadier A.A.E. Filoze
252nd Indian Armored Brigade - Brigadier G. Carr-White
10th Indian Motor Brigade - Brigadier Harold Redman
British 1st Infantry Division (Palestine Garrison)
King Force Desert Group (Dier Es Zour)
46th Mixed Infantry Div – (Arriving 17 January)
1st Para Division – Lt General Sir Frederick "Boy" Browning
1st and 2nd Brigades (Arriving 20 January)
No. 4 Commando – No. 6 Commando

INDIAN XXI CORPS – IRAQ - Lt-General Sir Mosley Mayne
8th Indian Infantry Division, Major-General Charles Harvey
17th Indian Infantry Brigade - Brigadier F.A.M.B. Jenkins
19th Indian Infantry Brigade - Brigadier C.W.W. Ford

10th Indian Infantry Division - Major-General Alan Blaxland
20th Indian Infantry Brigade - Brigadier L.E. MacGregor
25th Indian Infantry Brigade - Brigadier A.E. Arderne
6th Indian Infantry Division - Major-General J.N. Thomson
27th Indian Infantry Brigade - Brigadier A.R. Barker
6th Duke of Connaught's Own Lancers
5th Indian Infantry Division – Maj. General Harold R. Briggs
9th Indian Infantry Brigade – Brigadier William Langran
10th Indian Infantry Brigade – Brigadier John Finlay
29th Indian Infantry Brigade – Brigadier Whitehorn Reid

* * *

Humbugged was not half a word for what the Germans had just pulled off. General Zeitzler was in rare form, taking the reins from the disgruntled and embittered Franz Halder, and eager to please the Führer. He put his considerable skills to work, even going so far as to call in the legions of ‘Greens’ that Turing and Twinn had ruminated over. He got the new deliveries of armor and vehicles moved swiftly to Odessa, and the troops of 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions would find it all waiting for them when they arrived. They were eager to get their hands on the new tanks, for they had a lot of old, worn down equipment that needed replacement. After one look at those brand new Lions and Leopards, they were elated, with a new spring in their weary feet.

Fresh replacements for the Panzergrenadier Regiments were there to meet them as well, the veterans taking them under their wings, but making sure they got first dibs on the better equipment for themselves, handing off any of the older Pz III-Js to the newcomers. These two divisions would form the 2nd echelon of the operation, and German intelligence had indicated that the northernmost region of Syria was only lightly held by the British. Preference was therefore given to the shipment of the Brandenburgers, and 10th Motorized Division was close behind it, along with the Prinz Eugen 7th SS Mountain Division pulled out of Croatia and Serbia, where it had been conducting anti-partisan sweeps.

Zeitzler had all these forces moving like the hands of a well-oiled clock.

He brilliantly coordinated the mustering of Goring's JU-52s on the airfields in Greece, and after moving back through Tunis to Sicily, the Fallshirmjager units crossed at the Straits of Messina and then boarded trains to Taranto. The Italians had agreed to lift them by sea, and cover that movement with a rare sortie by their last few heavy ships based at that port. They would deliver them to Patras, Greece, and from there they went by rail to Athens.

The British would see all these formations converging in Greece and Northern Syria, and also realized that the Germans had not been idle in Turkey in the last year. While they could barely support a division the previous year on the old Turkish rails, this time they had moved a full mobile corps, and did so with well-practiced skill honed over years of war fighting under much more difficult conditions in Russia.

This time the Germans were coming to fight, and Hitler was combining *Operation Phoenix* with two others, a major thrust to the south in the dead of the Russian winter. The first would be the long fear German assault on Crete, *Operation Merkur*, and the last would be a renewed push to destroy the last Soviet resistance in the Kuban, *Operation Edelweiss*.

Just when it seemed that the war was settling in to a familiar pattern, with the Allies in the west ready to squeeze Rommel and von Arnim into Tunisia, and then begin planning for the invasion of Sicily, things began to spin off in a completely different direction. The Allies were back on their feet after the disastrous early years, and they were starting to throw hard punches, but Germany was still the heavyweight champion of the world when it came to the deadly art of war, able to wrestle with a massive Soviet Army on the one hand, and still fight all these battles in the West.

1943 was beginning with some real surprises. As the new year dawned, the Lions were still on the prowl, and the war would be taken to distant lands that it had barely scorched in Fedorov's history. It was all being rewritten now, and his hand would still figure prominently in the outcome of all these events.

Part VI

Speed

“If everything seems under control, you're not going fast enough.”

—Mario Andretti

Chapter 16

The Germans decided to show the British their hand before they drew any more cards. They would proceed with Operation Phoenix first and foremost, thinking this would force their enemy to commit all his reserves to that theater, in effect, showing them all the cards they held as well. Meanwhile, Student's Sky Hunters would take in new recruits, brush the dust and sand of North Africa off their uniforms and equipment, and get time to refit and prepare for Operation Merkur.

While Crete's forward position against the Aegean represented a real threat to any shipping, all the forces allocated to Operation Phoenix were coming through Turkey by rail, which put the British in a most uncomfortable position. Head of the Western Desert Air Force, Sir Arthur Coningham, was the first to voice the dilemma.

"We can't hit that rail line without direct approval from the Prime Minister," he said. "It's all on Turkish soil. If you want my word on it, the Turks ought to realize they can't have things both ways any longer. They want to sit there under the cloak of neutrality, but they have allowed German combat units to transit their sovereign territory, and overfly their airspace as if there could be no consequences. By god, the Germans have even based aircraft at Iskenderun!"

"I understand what you are saying," said Wavell. "Yet if Churchill can't persuade them to rescind their license to Jerry, then we shall have no other option. We'll have to hit them, and diplomacy be damned. Letting the wolf in through your front gate is bad enough. Feeding him every day is quite another thing. The Germans will also have to rely on that rail line to keep all those troops supplied, and at some point, if not this very moment, interdiction of that rail connection will be of primary importance. I intend to argue this as strongly as possible in my communications to Whitehall. For the moment, however, you will have to concentrate your interdiction effort on their main receiving stations on Syrian soil—Aleppo would come to mind immediately."

"Yes," said Coningham, "they've move fighters there as well—fair game. But you realize this is going to put a crimp in the support I can offer

O’Connor. I’ve earmarked four fighter groups to impose air superiority, but I had to take two of them from Cyrenaica. I spoke with Tooey Spaatz and the Americans might be able to support us with their 57th Fighter Group. That would help out immensely.”

“Do what you must. We have to secure this flank, and at this point, we don’t really know how serious a threat this will be. If it’s a nuisance incursion to tap us on the shoulder, that would be one thing. If it’s a really big operation, then we could be at it in Syria for months. The presence of the Brandenburg Division teeing off at the first hole leads me to think they mean business.”

Even as those two men spoke, Lieutenant Gruber had that business right in front of him, a roadblock at the tiny hamlet of Abu Ad Duhur, about 40 kilometers south of Aleppo. The road he took south had followed the rail line to the larger cities of Hamah and Homs. He had moved very quickly, down through Saybiyah and Rassef, and now he ordered up the Armored Car Company to see if they might blow right on through this enemy position. As soon as they moved, a flight of three British Hurricanes appeared overhead, and they came swooping down to attack.

It was a strafing run, their machine guns blazing away and churning up a lot of dust at the head of the column. Moments later Gruber would learn they had taken their first casualties, a SdkFz 221 light armored car that was shot up so bad that it had to be pushed off the road. Just outside the hamlet, lying low in a thicket at the edge of a small cultivated area, a company of the Frontier Horse were ready to open fire. They didn’t have much to hurt those armored cars, but the few 2” mortars they had were firing for all they were worth.

Gruber studied them briefly, peering through his field glasses. His troops had stood like a stone wall in the face of massed Soviet attacks that would send three or four divisions against the line at one time, supported by droves of armor. He shook his head, a sneer on his lips, then looked at his map.

“Sergeant!” he said over his shoulder.

“Sir?”

“Get back and tell Leutnant Kramer to take his motorcycle company east five kilometers, then south to secure a small airstrip. We’ll be needing that soon. The motorized company can come right on up.”

The SkdFz *Schwerer Panzerspähwagen* was the latest of the production

lines in that category, a fast eight wheeled armored car with a 20mm quick firing main gun. It could theoretically put out 280 rounds per minute, as it was based on the 20mm flak gun, though it was seldom ever put to that test. The suppressive quality of that stinging fire was immediate, and the guns quickly silenced those mortar teams. Gruber could see his column pushing through with no difficulty, and he whistled to wave up his infantry. An hour later he learned his motorcycle company had secured the small air strip, and then pushed on south another 20 kilometers to Abu Darikah.

As they continued south through the dry stony country, the three companies fanned out, looking for any further sign of organized enemy resistance, but finding the land barren and empty. Yet the sky about that ground was not empty, and it was immediately clear to Gruber that the enemy was going to have air support in this battle. The Germans had several squadrons of Me-109s up, but only 86 fighters between them, and they were scarcely seen. What was seen were the Hurricanes, Kittyhawks and even a few squadrons of Spitfires. Coningham had over 200 fighters up that day, and he was clearly taking out his frustrations with a ruthless hold on the skies over this battlefield.

That will make a difference, thought Gruber. The Luftwaffe once seemed invincible, but not any longer. Here in the West, Goring is spread very thin, and a lot of our fighters went to Luftflotte II and Fliegerkorps X for the Crete operation. Well, we will have to make do with what we have.

He waited astride the rail line south, watching the trucks of 1st Brandenburg Motorized Regiment moving past him now, the long column of vehicles off to the east. There were thin trails of smoke in their wake, like candles that had been blown out, the smoke curling up into the windless sky. That was where the enemy planes had struck, but thus far, they were making very swift progress south nonetheless.

Far to the east, the Brandenburg Lehr Regiment under Obersturmfuhrer Konrad was also racing along the main road that led from Aleppo to Ar Raqqah on the upper Euphrates. That was the town that Fedorov, Troyak and the Russian Marines had fought for, with the help of the Argonauts. There they had foiled the efforts of the German Paratroopers with their fast moving helicopters, and the withering support fire that could put out. They met no opposition until they reached the town of Meskene after a blistering 80 kilometer road march. The frontier horse were there too, but they met with

the same sad fate that Gruber had dealt out further west.

Konrad's group had three special Kommando units with them, and one was sent to secure the bridge over the Euphrates at Kesfra, while the other two occupied two old abandoned French air strips along the main highway at El Aboud and Jirah. This regiment was acting like Gruber's force, clearing the way ahead, securing the line of communications and probing towards Ar Raqqah. It would be followed by Motorized Regiments III and IV under Duren and Langen, the main force intended for the battle they expected at the city.

Luftwaffe reconnaissance had identified a strong enemy presence there at Ar Raqqah. It was a major bridge over the Euphrates leading north to the Turkish frontier, and the British had an airfield there that Konrad was to take at his earliest opportunity.

In his way, would be Brigadier Legentilhomme and his Free French Division, a force that was really about the size of a single brigade. It had one battalion of Foreign Legionnaires, four more Senegalese Marche Battalions, a mechanized company of five old armored cars, and 12 antiquated Char H-39 French tanks. The area was seen as such a backwater region that it had never been built up with better equipment. Two batteries of 75mm guns rounded it off, with one battalion of Marine Fusiliers posted on the two main bridges. These six odd battalions were about to be visited by three regiments of the Brandenburgers.

* * *

Wavell was going to have a long day, and a very sleepless night. The only thing that looked promising was Coningham's control of the air. On the ground, the Germans had pushed boldly over the Turkish Frontier and were racing south an east, with a preponderance of their infantry forces near the coast. He had the two British infantry divisions of General Edward Quinan's 10th Army. Anderson's III Corps was their operational HQ, with 5th Division deployed from the coast at the port of Baniyas and covering a 100 Kilometer front east to screen the city of Hamah. The 56th Division was centered on Palmyra further south and covering a similar front that included postings at the T3 and T4 pumping stations for the Tripoli Pipeline. That was vital infrastructure, and it was soon to become a battleground.

Between The populous city of Homs and that T4 Pumping station, there was a 90 kilometer gap that was only lightly patrolled by the 56th Division Recon battalion. If the enemy had the force to engage the 5th Division, they could bypass Hamah to the east, and flow right into that gap. It had to be filled, and by troops that had some ability to contest the ground in what might soon become a fast battle of maneuver.

The only force he had for that was the Indian 31st Armored Division, a relatively inexperienced unit, though the troops were resolute and loyal. That force was at Damascus, and he could move it swiftly north by rail to Homs. Then he would have to move something into Damascus, for that major city could not be left without a standing garrison.

Most of the armor had been east of Damascus, running about on drills as they trained in their new equipment, but he would get the recon battalion, two motorized Infantry battalions, an artillery battalion and the 32nd Madras Engineers moving north on the trains right away. When word came down that the unit was going into battle, the men were quite excited.

“Anand!” came the cry of a young sapper. He was just a Sepoy, or a Private of engineers, looking for his Platoon Halvidar, the Sergeant with a very long name—Anandsubramanian. Anand meant happiness, bliss or joy, a common given name in India. The surname Subramanian hailed from Southern India, a combination of two Sanskrit/Tamil words that might be loosely translated as “worthy jewel.” An amiable man, the Sergeant was often called by his first name by the men he knew best, Anand.

“What now, Kaling? Don’t tell me you‘ve gone and lost you drill kit yet again. I told you to be ready for training at first light.”

“No Sergeant. It’s not a drill this time! The Germans have crossed the border, and the whole division is going north to fight them!”

“What? The Germans? Don’t think you can fool me again, Kaling. I’m on to you this time.”

The Sepoy’s penchant for jest was well known. He was young at just eighteen years, with bright eyes, a quick mind and a lot of mischief in his soul. Kaling Kapoor was right in his element here, as he had come from Jodhpur in the north near the Great Thar Desert. How he managed to wrangle his way into an Engineer battalion that had formed in Madras was another story, one too long to tell here. In spite of his stern outer aspect, Halvidar Anandsubramanian had taken the lad under his wing, intending to keep the

young man on his toes as well.

32nd Madras Sappers & Miners had been an established unit in the Indian Army since the outbreak of the war. Their job was to further and assist the movement of friendly forces, while impeding the movement of the enemy. As such, they would often be assigned to road details, bridge work, the building of camps and fortifications, and the demolition of enemy fieldworks. 31st Armored relied on them to make sure their new tanks could get over the many wadis and gullies that fingered their way through the Syrian deserts, so it was no surprise that they would get one of the first orders to move out.

The unit had a long history, dating back to 1780 when the first two companies were raised and eventually formed the Madras Pioneer Battalion. They were the "Queen's Own" during the 1800s, until reference to Her Majesty was dropped from the unit designation in 1941.

Called the "Thambis" by others in the division, they wore a distinctive shako as headgear, a cylindrical cap with a red plume or 'pompom' at the top. With this distinguished military history, they were a tight professional unit, well trained, and many in their ranks had already fought the Germans in North Africa, and in Burma against the Japanese.

"Germans! It's true Anand. I'm not trying to fool you this time. They came right over the border and took Aleppo. You can go and ask the Subedar if you don't believe me. Come on! We've got orders to go to the rail station!"

Now here's the Moonbird giving me orders, thought Anand. He often called the Private that in his mind, Pakshee, for the lad would sit under the full moon and sing in the late evening. He got up, straightened his uniform and cap, and fixed Private Kapoor with a level stare.

"Very well," he said. "But please know what will happen to you if I go there and find you are singing me songs, Pakshee. I'll boil you in the morning gruel!"

The Moonbird was not fooling him this time. By noon the entire Battalion had formed up on the rail line in the eastern quadrant of Damascus, and they were loading up, along with both the Motorized Infantry battalions, a cavalry unit, some light armored cars, and the division headquarters and staff.

The Germans, he thought. Back for more trouble again, are they? We'll see about that. The Sergeant was all business now, sorting through his platoon, tightening the straps on backpacks, looking to see that the men all had their rifles and shovels, and always with one eye on Pakshee, watching

him flit about from one squad to another, so excited to be getting a chance at combat for his very first time.

Anand had seen more than enough already, and there was a sadness in his heart as he watched the young man. He’s going to see the elephant, he thought. Right now he’s just one of the blind men taking hold of his tail and being led off to war, but soon he’ll see what it’s really all about. Something in him didn’t want that for the lad, and he wondered how the Private’s song would change after he endured the rigors, and the terrors, of real combat. For now, the Moonbird was still a young and happy man, and he inwardly hoped he would always stay that way.

Chapter 17

Brigadier Joe Kingstone was still the general warden of the Eastern Syrian Desert, and gritty and irascible as always. A veteran of the action during Operation Scimitar, his flying column had been dispatched from the Trans Jordan region in Palestine to cross 300 miles of desert and relieve the beleaguered garrison at the chief British base projecting air power in the central area, Habbaniyah. There, between Fallujah and Ramadi, northwest of Baghdad, they had come to find a legion of very strange soldiers had already held off the rebellious Iraqi troops, with equipment the like of which he had never seen before.

Kingstone had also fought for Palmyra, but found the German paratroopers there too much for his small column to handle. After that action he had left the Middle East briefly to help organize the new 30th Armored Brigade and his health had then seen him take quieter postings at home. But in this history, he remain robust and fit, and the lure of the desert still called him. He therefore requested, and was granted, a posting to the new British Mandate in Syria, back to his old command.

Now he had been reinforced, with newest armored cars replacing the old Whites and Lafeys. He had the new AEC III and Mark IV Humbers in three companies, and even a few Mark I Humber AA cars for protection against enemy aircraft. It was more fast mobile armor than he had ever seen in those halcyon early days of Habforce and Kingcol, and he admired the new AEC III for its durability, protection and hitting power with that QF 75mm gun. His force was now a proper brigade, with three battalions of motorized infantry, the 1st Essex, Wiltshire Yeomanry and Warwickshire Battalion. Now it was called simply ‘King Force,’ the wildcard in Wavell’s hand.

He had been posted on the Euphrates near Hadithah where the main pipeline came down from Baba Gurgur before splitting to service the two pipelines to Tripoli and Haifa. A tall, stocky officer with a burly build and rough disposition, Kingstone received the news about Aleppo with some surprise.

“We’re to move immediately to Dier es Zour,” he said to Colonel Albert Chambers, who was deputy commander of the force, otherwise known as

‘Big Al.’

“That’s Glubb Pasha’s beat,” said Chambers. “I’m not sure whether he’ll be happy to see us or not.”

Glubb Pasha was still hard at work writing his own legend as the leader of the Arab Legion, a force of about 300 men that scoured the desert looking for disgruntled locals still loyal to the old school governments in the region before the British came. There were many tribes who were also untethered to any flag, roving bands, brigands, desert raiders that had to be watched and kept in check. Though Glubb was not a British serving officer, he was deeply invested in their interests, the new Lawrence of Arabia in these parts, and he could move like the desert wind across shifting sands of this barren terrain, knowing it all like the back of his hand by now.

“I think he was scouting up the Khabur River towards Suwar,” said Kingstone. “Fuzzy Quack’s been milling about up there.” He was referring to the local guerilla fighter and Arab nationalist, Fawsi el Quwukji and his Bedouin raiders. “The clever little scallywag has been trying to get at the pipelines again, but Glubb is onto him—chased him halfway up that river.”

“Well now we’ve got bigger fish to fry,” said Chambers. “I thought we handed Jerry his hat here long ago, but it seems he’s a bone to pick.”

“That is does.” Kingstone put his field glasses into a light field pack and reached for the sandy desert cap he preferred. “Alright, the armored cars were down south. Let’s get them north. I’ll move out the infantry directly.”

“Well who’s going to mind the store here?” asked Chambers.

“10th Indian Division has marching orders too. They’ll be along shortly.”

“4th Cav is out at T1, should we leave them there?”

“No, I’ll need them up north, but they can leave that Ack Ack company at the pumping station. The RAF seems to have things under control, but it might help.”

* * *

Unbeknownst to either man, their lives were going to get very busy soon. When Adolf Hitler respawned his ambitions in the Middle East, he sent a secret request to Ivan Volkov, asking him to participate in the operation. Owing the Fuhrer a debt many times over, Volkov pulled together an army from his deep reserve forces in Turkmenistan. Two divisions were raised, the

1st and 2nd Turkomen Infantry, each composed of three Brigades , and they were mustering to sweep into Iran near Gorgon, just east of the Caspian sea. From there they would move to Tehran, finding themselves welcomed by the locals, who were leaning towards Germany all along.

That had been one reason why the British had mounted an invasion of Iran in conjunction with the Soviets in late 1941, but that was in Fedorov's history. Since Volkov controlled that entire border zone, the Soviets could never join such an operation in this history, and the British had paid it little more than lip survive here. Now that oversight would come back to haunt them.

Hitler had opened his desk drawer and pulled out the same old plans he drafted long ago…. *"The struggle against the British positions in the Mediterranean and in Western Asia will be continued by converging attacks launched from Libya through Egypt, from Bulgaria through Turkey, and in certain circumstances also from Transcaucasia through Iran…. If the collapse of the Soviet forces there has created the necessary conditions, preparations will be made for the dispatch of a motorized expeditionary force from Transcaucasia against Iraq, with the aim of further reinforcing the Vichy French position in Syria."*

That last bit was no longer possible, for there was no Vichy French force to reinforce. But the conditions he hoped for had finally presented themselves with the refurbishment of the Turkish rail lines from Istanbul to the Syrian border.

"Once we have obtained freedom of movement in Asia Minor, then the British will soon feel the full weight of German military power. The forces committed to Syria to stop the British offensives must be sustained and supported, but we cannot yet rely on sea communications to the Levant. Therefore the Luftwaffe must do everything possible to protect and preserve these rail lines of communications, should the British see Operation Phoenix as a pretext to violate Turkish neutrality.

"Whether and in what way it may be possible to wreck finally the English position between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, in conjunction with an offensive against Suez Canal, is still in the lap of the Gods…"

The Führer had amended that last phrase to read *"a question that can only be answered after Barbarossa."* Now that operation was long over, and he returned to chew on this old bone, like a dog looking for meat wherever he might find it.

The appeal to Volkov was aimed at bolstering his forces when the operation finally reached Iraq, for his strategy was now far more reaching than the mere engagement of British forces in Syria and the Levant. Alexandria and Egypt were no longer the coveted final objectives. Now he was after the oil. Whether he could ever actually use any of it if he conquered the oil fields remained in the lap of the Gods, but he could at least deny its use to the enemy.

It was therefore decided that the push south would move as far as practical to sustain a strong defensive front, while the main effort of the mobile divisions would be aimed at Iraq. This was why the bulk of the Brandenburg Division had turned east towards Ar Raqqah, and while Leutnant Gruber would now begin angling that direction as he continued southwest to approach Palmyra. Yet that town was well shielded on its northern front, by some of the most rugged highlands in the northeastern desert. The stony ground was unsuitable for vehicles, and there were few roads, except at the Tayyibah Pass, which opened near the small village of Al Kwam in the north, ran south through Tayyibah to As Sukhnah northeast of Palmyra. That last town was just a little northeast of the T3 Pumping station, which was the easternmost outpost of Lieutenant General Miles 56th Infantry Division. If the Brandenburgers reached that place, they would be in a perfect position to race southeast, cut the pipeline and flank the 56th.

At the same time, the Germans knew they needed to control the long winding course of the Euphrates, which ran from Ar Raqqah through Dier es Zour and then south to Hadithah and beyond. So as Wavell continued to develop his position, he was moving all his knights and bishops out into the center of the board. He gave a little ground on the coast, pulling the 13th Brigade of 5th Infantry back to Tartus. From there the pawns stretched inland, through the great castle fortress at Masyaf, (pronounced “Ma-sigh-aff”) and further inland to Hamah. That was the first big city he was prepared to fight for, and all the rest of 5th Division was deployed about 25 klicks to the north and west of that place. The first elements of the Indian 31st Armored Division, mostly infantry, would move out to extend the defense to the northeast, and the 32nd Madras Sappers were in the city itself, fresh off the trains.

Halvidar Anandsubramanian was counting his eggs as the men leapt off the train cars, looking for Moonbird. There he was, toting his pack, the canteen jangling, and his arms full of long tubing that the sappers would use to deploy Bangalore Torpedoes.

“Packshee! Be careful now,” he cautioned. “Don’t drop those.”

“I think we are going to attack an enemy bunker,” said the young Private. “If that is so, then let Private Kaling Kapoor be the first.” He smiled, already proud of himself.

“Don’t be hasty, Packshee. First we must see to putting those demolition charges on the city bridges. Weren’t you listening at the briefing?”

“Of course I was. But after that, we attack the bunkers—Yes?”

“No,” said Anand, shaking his head as he folded his arms. They are attacking us! It is our job to stop them first. Only then might they build field fortifications for us to attack. That is what we are doing now—preparing to stop them. So put those down over there by that road cart and go see to the demolition charges first. And don’t drop any of those either.” He frowned, shaking a finger at Moonbird, and struggling to keep from smiling as he watch the lad struggle to manage three Bangalore tubes and his field pack and rifle all at the same time.

There came the sound of distant artillery, and the young man turned his head, his eyes alight. Combat, the sound rolling in like thunder from the north. This was more excitement than he had had for many months, and he was very eager. The Sergeant winced as he saw him nearly drop a Bangalore tube, but he managed, and went clattering off towards the cart.

* * *

The sound they had heard were the 25 pounders of 156th Field Artillery Regiment, 17th Brigade, 5th Division. They were on the line due north of the city, and now the German 10th Motorized Division under General Schmidt had come up to begin the attack on Hamah. This would be the first relatively cohesive defense the Germans had faced, and their own forces were starting to deploy into a line of battle as they swerved left and right off the road.

On the coast, opposite 13th Brigade, the Germans were moving up the 6th Mountain Division, and the troops of the Prinz Eugen Mountain Division, all well suited to the rugged mountainous terrain in that sector. General Kubler himself, the commander of 49th Giebergs Korps had not even arrived yet with his own 1st Division, but he was coming. The Germans were now building up like water behind a thin dam north of Hamah, with 6th Mountain on the northwest flank, then Prinz Eugen, 10th Motorized, and finally the 3rd

and 4th Panzer Divisions.

Guderian had finally arrived in force.

The first probing attack by 10th Motorized had been held off, the 25 Pounders timely and spot on with their defensive fires. But that single British division, even reinforced by 31st Indian Armored, was not going to be anywhere near enough to hold for any length of time. Speed and concentration of force were the hallmarks of Guderian's approach, and he was demonstrating the same mercurial skills in the art of maneuver warfare as he had in Russia, his spirits revitalized after those desperate frozen months in the drive on Moscow.

"What is in front of us?" he asked Schmidt of 10th Motorized when he reached the scene.

"A mixed force. It looks to be a regular British Infantry Brigade, and now we've seen Indian motorized infantry coming up to support their right flank. But my division is in good order."

"Well, if you were moving fast enough that would not be the case!" said Guderian. "Alright, you can cover Schneider's move around their flank." Now the General looked at the commander of 4th Panzer.

"I'm already executing a wide envelopment to the east," said Schneider. "I have infantry and the recon battalion south of Hamah! There's nothing there. We can bypass and go right into Homs if you wish."

"I do *not* wish that," said Guderian. "We don't want Homs, or even Hamah. They deployed much too far forward, so now we'll make them pay for that. We can get the mountain divisions up much quicker to establish their defensive front. Then we move all of Hube's 14th Panzer Korps east. Westhoven's 3rd Panzer is just coming in by rail. I'll have them follow your tracks. Herr Schmidt, continue with your envelopment, but be ready to pull out on a moment's notice to move east. Kubler's divisions will fix them in place, but I want the Panzer Divisions to push right into this gap here—right astride that pipeline that runs from Homs east to Palmyra."

"What about the Brandenburgers?" asked Hube.

"Forget about them for the time being. I sent them to Ar Raqqah and the Euphrates. Once we get in to position, then your division moves on Palmyra. When we do so, speed will be of the essence. Leading units should bypass enemy strong points and push on. Be relentless."

The Brandenburgers were already moving on their first big objective at

Ar Raqqah. They had raced east, below the bend of the Euphrates, where Langen's 4th Regiment crossed to approach the city from the north. Konrad's Lehr Regiment and Duren's 3rd Regiment then moved along the south bank of the river. Most of the city sat on the north bank of the Euphrates, with two good bridges over the river. To the east was hill 266, a good point to overlook the town itself, and the airfield was just north of this feature, on a low plateau bounded on the north by a canal and stream that reached down to the Euphrates. There was higher ground south of those bridges, the heights of Tell Assaad, Qaret el Beit, and Qaret Hajana. Beckermann wanted that high ground, for it would not only serve to cut off the enemy garrison from any retreat south, but he could also post his artillery there.

Those three regiments should be enough to take the city, or so he believed. The 1st and 2nd Regiments were already well to the south, racing for that gap in the rugged highlands, Tayyibah Pass.

Chapter 18

“What’s the situation?” asked Wavell. He had flown in to the airfield at Homs, and was shocked to learn that German recon units were already feeling their way around the position north of Hamah. 10th Army commander, General Quinan, was there along with his III Corps commander, General Anderson, and the newly arrived General Walter Clutterbuck of the 1st Infantry Division. That unit had been the Palestine garrison force, but Wavell had already sent two of its brigades north to meet the enemy, one to reinforce the coast against the German mountain troops, and the second right there at Homs, arriving at a most opportune time.

“Jerry’s got round our right,” said Quinan. “Ficklin is too far forward. Remember what happened to Percival in Malaya,” he admonished. “We’ve gone and done the same thing—too far forward, and the Germans are simply bypassing our line at Hamah.”

“Well where’s the bloody Indian Armored Division?” asked Wavell, somewhat irritated.

“Half of it went on up to Hamah, mostly the infantry and engineers. The other half is right here where we need them.”

“What have we identified on the other side?” Wavell leaned over the map.

“4th Panzer is moving in here, just east of our position where we stand. 10th Motorized is on the line facing off with Ficklin. The rest are the mountain troops, west to the coast at Tartus.”

“What about the Brandenburgers?”

“They went east to Ar Raqqah.”

“I see… Well the French won’t hold that for very long. Has King Force moved?”

“Yes sir, they reached Dier-ez-Zour this morning,” said Anderson. That wasn’t exactly true. The fast moving 4th Cavalry was there, but most of King Force was still strung out along the long road from Hadithah, and they were getting low on petrol.

“The good news is that 10th Indian has come up from Baghdad,” said Quinan. “The head of their column is at Hadithah.”

“Can the French get out of Ar Raqqah?”

“They might. The secondary road on the east bank of the river is still open. But if they can hold on a few days that would buy us time.”

“Yes, but at the cost of that brigade,” said Wavell. “I want them out of there. They can move south to link up with King Force and the Indian Division. Then we’ll have enough in hand to make a stand. Glubb Pasha is at Dier-ez-Zour. He can get the French to good ground if they can get south. As it stands, Ar Raqqah isn’t important to us at the moment.”

“Well sir,” said Anderson. “Most of the country east of the Euphrates is fairly wild—Bedu trash and such. Glubb Pasha is up there running them hither and thither every other week. From Ar Raqqah Jerry can just push on east and he can be in Iraq in two days. I daresay those bandits up there would roll out the welcome mat for the Germans.”

“Quite likely,” said Wavell, “but I’ve looked that over and taken measures to prevent it. 5th Indian Division has moved down from Kirkuk. They can serve as a blocking force if Jerry moves as you suggest. Get the French moving. We’ll do much better fighting for Dier-ez-Zour. Ar Raqqah is too far north, just as you cautioned a moment ago.”

“Very good sir.”

“Alright then, what shall we do about Hamah?” Wavell looked them all over. Clutterbuck was quiet, having only just arrived, and deferring to the senior officer present, Anderson.

“Holding Hamah covers the road through Masyaf to the coast, but Ficklin’s 5th is trying to hold a front of nearly 90 kilometers. It just won’t do. They’ll turn his right flank tomorrow, if not today. RAF says there’s still a lot of movement up north on both road and rail lines. They may just be shaking themselves out and getting ready to move.”

“You say Ficklin is 25 klicks north of Hamah?”

“Yes sir, right about here, I should think.”

“Then let’s get him back closer to the city. He can still hold on at Masyaf, but his line can move right through Hamah… and general Clutterbuck.”

“Sir?”

“Would you move anything you have at hand up this road? That should help cover Ficklin’s flank.”

“Right sir, I can send three battalions directly.”

“Good. Your 2nd Brigade is still at Beirut, am I correct?”

“It is, sir.”

“Then have it put on the trains and bring it here. As for that armor, when it gets here it will be our inside counterpunch if they break through towards Homs.”

“And what if they bypass?” asked Anderson. “They can reach the Tripoli Pipeline in another day or so.”

Wavell took a deep breath, rubbing his forehead, and looking very old and tired. “Then we fight,” he said. “They can’t very well leave what amounts to two divisions in their rear. They can run about if they please, but they’ll have to deal with us, won’t they? When 46th Division arrives things will look a good deal different. So we hold on, and we fight them. After all, that is what we’re here for.”

It certainly was.

* * *

John Bagot Glubb had taken his fabled Arab Legion right up the road from Dier-ez-Zour to perhaps the most defensible ground in the region. To the west, the imposing heights of Jabal Buliyah rose above stony flanks that were scored in every direction by dee winding wadis. It was therefore quite difficult to attempt any flanking move from that direction, particularly for motorized troops. To the east was the river, and beyond it the barren reaches of the Syrian Desert. That flank might be turned, but only by a force on that side of the river, and the only crossing points were up near Ar Raqqah. So any force that came down the main road on the west bank of the Euphrates would simply have to try and bull their way through the blocking position he had set up.

A fluent speaker of Arabic, and well-schooled in the ways of both the desert and the Bedouin tribes that inhabited the place, Glubb proved most useful. He learned everything he knew the hard way, in the desert itself, where he had once taken a 500 mile camel ride with the tribes. Now he adopted their ways, earning their growing respect as he did so, a leader from the British Empire that was embraced as one of their own.

To look at him one would not think the man capable of the things history recorded in his name. He was a diminutive, almost impish figure, with a round bulbous nose, deep blue eyes, sandy hair and ruddy complexion, with a small mustache. A wisp of a smile was often on his lips, and he listened much

more than he ever spoke. The wound he had suffered in WWI when a bullet grazed his chin gave him an odd, cheeky look, and he had a quiet disposition that belied the inner strength of the man.

His troops were also strong men, hardened by the desert, a wild streak in them, but also the hardness of rock, and an implacable nature that would make them tenacious fighters. They had been recruited into the legion, wearing British uniforms, but with Arab headdress and the legion badge of a Royal crown above two curved scimitars. Their thick belts held a pistol on one side and a curved dagger on the other to augment their rifle or sub-machinegun. Bandoliers of ammunition were strung from each shoulder, the bullets jutting like sharp teeth. How Glubb had won their hearts is not entirely known, but they worshiped him, and would follow him anywhere.

He had set up at the village of Aannabe, astride the main road and on the heights of Tel Salem about 5 kilometers to the west. At noon on the 13th, he saw troops approaching, and the fists of his men tightened on their weapons. Glubb wasn't a man to be taken by surprise. He had his small armored car company about 10 kilometers up the road, and now they reported by radio that the dust in the distance was a column of French troops—the Free French Brigade that had retreated from Ar Raqqah.

That was to be expected, he thought. Better to have them here with us than to fight it out alone up there. He got on the radio and passed the word on to Brigadier Kingstone, who had finally reached Dier-ez-Zour after a 175 mile road march over the last two days. The news he conveyed had a barb in it, for the French had reported that the Germans were now advancing on both sides of the river. Kingstone contacted the French, asking them to withdraw on Dier-ez-Zour and cross east of the river at Ayyash to cover that flank. He could then backstop both positions from this position in the city, and the 10th Indian Division was only a day behind him.

So Glubb settled in, brewing up a cuppa on the heights of Tel Salem, and looked over his "girls." That's what the British regulars called them, "Glubb's Girls," though they meant no disrespect. They did so because in spite of the fact that the Arabs were all issued uniforms, they insisted on wearing their flowing white desert robes over them, and their long dark hair streamed in the wind when they were on the move. But these ladies were not to be trifled with. They had a singular ardor for battle, and could often be heedlessly brave, forsaking any thought of their own personal safety in the interest of

honor, and sometimes, vengeance.

They were a sharp sword that Glubb had somehow managed to sheath and carry on the hip of the British Empire, even though he was not technically in the service of His Majesty's armed forces any longer. He had resigned his commission to focus on leading the Arab Legion, and today he had led it here to this desolate place, to face one of the best divisions in the German Army.

* * *

Oberst Frieburg had taken his 1st Regiment of the Brandenburgers right through Tayyibah Pass. Leutnant Gruber led the way, and when they reached As Sukhnah, they found a battalion of British regulars well entrenched around the village. They were the 9th Royal Fusiliers, a tripwire defense to warn of any enemy encroachment in that area, but now they would face a difficult fight. Frieburg deployed to attack on all sides, and by noon it was a veritable Rorke's Drift of a position, machine guns rattling, mortars firing, infantry advancing under cover of smoke.

The Fusiliers, though badly outnumbered, held on in their slit trenches all afternoon. Near dusk the fighting subsided, and taking advantage of a gap in the enemy encirclement, the British leapt to their trucks and raced south. The alarm was raised, and that had prompted General Miles at Palmyra to deploy the bulk of his forces there to cover that flank. Unfortunately, that was exactly what Guderian had intended, for that regiment of the Brandenburgers was merely meant to make a demonstration by occupying that pass. They were in a position to move either east to Dier-ez-Zour, or west to Palmyra, and in either case, they would be severing the vital Tripoli pipeline.

As darkness fell, the British did not yet know how big the force was in the Tayyibah Pass, nor did they know that they had no intention of proceeding west to threaten Palmyra. General Beckermann was still deciding how to proceed after mopping up at Ar Raqqah.

"The French wanted nothing to do with us," he said to Konrad. "Since we have them by the balls back in France, it's no surprise they have none here." The General was looking over his map.

"Look at that terrain to the west," said Oberst Langen. "That's impossible to flank if we take this main road."

"Then take your regiment east of the river. Konrad, your Lehr Regiment

goes with him. Take this junction here, and demonstrate towards Dier-ez-Zour. I want to see what they have up their sleeves there."

"You mean to attack it from that side of the river? That won't be easy. It looks like there is only one small bridge."

"I don't mean to attack it at all. You two are going to Baba Gurgur. The only reason we need Dier-ez Zour is for a watering hole. That said, Frieburg is already through this gap here. I'm ordering him east towards that place to support your approach. That move cuts their precious pipeline, but I don't want that infrastructure destroyed. We're going to need it after this is over. Once we determine what they are doing, then I make the decision on how and when we move into Iraq. Oberst Duren, that leaves you. Take 3rd Regiment right down the main road, and I'm adding both the Panzerjaegers and Pioneers to your force. Let's see if they want to fight for that town."

Beckermann was privy to plans Guderian had laid out before the battle. He knew that the main drive south was going to see a panzer division directed at Palmyra from the west, a force that would then come east to the river along that pipeline route. 4th Panzer had been in the lead, but Guderian had stopped it to rest and refuel. Right behind it, he had a very fresh 3rd Panzer Division, for they had come most of the way by rail. Detrained and ready to move on the morning of the 14th, he sent the division through the ground taken earlier by the 4th, now prepared to execute the plan he had devised.

As he predicted, the British used their rail lines to rapidly move forces north from Beirut, Palestine and Damascus. He had no intention of fighting for any of those cities, or allowing himself to get bogged down in costly and time consuming street fighting. Instead, he wanted to quickly extricate his mobile divisions, and then send the rest of Hube's 14th Panzer Korps east in the wake of 3rd Panzer Division. The ground he now occupied would be held by the 49th Giebergs Korps, and to that end, Kruger was finally arriving on the main rail line with his 1st Mountain Division. He would now command three divisions of those tough mountain troops, and with no other aim but to hold the line, keep the British in check, and prevent them from any move north that could threaten the main supply base at Aleppo.

Thus far, everything was going according to plan. He was still one step ahead of the British in the footrace, and he hoped to stay there. Speed, he thought. One can never be too tidy if you really want to move. Speed in war is a dirty and chaotic business, but one horse given free reins will always get

farther than three pulling a wagon. I already sent my thoroughbred east, and they have delivered Ar Raqqah right on schedule. But I cannot send just that single division into Iraq, strong as it may be. Now I must move to phase II of my plan, and speed is of the essence here—breakneck speed.

Even resting 4th Panzer for a day saw the General ill at ease and hankering to get moving again. For war was war, a wayward bride and one given to rash fits on a whim. Things would happen that would test the mettle of every unit involved, for the stakes were higher and most truly realized, in this world and all those that came after.

Part VII

Unforgiving Minutes

“If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!”

—Rudyard Kipling, *If: A Father’s Advice to His Son*

Chapter 19

Private Kaling Kapoor was very busy. He had gotten his hands on a British Bren gun, and he had spent the last hour figuring out how it worked. Now he was elated, rushing towards the forward lines where the platoon had been digging in and building fortified strong points. The Sergeant caught a blur of movement out of his right eye, and turned his head, seeing the Moonbird trying to squeeze past an ammo cart.

“Private Kapoor!” he shouted. “Stand where you are!” He strode quickly over, giving the young man a stern look. “Now where in the world did you get that?”

“From the British,” said the Private, beaming. “I’m going to use it to attack the Germans.”

“The British? They just gave that to you?”

“No Sergeant. I traded them for it—but I drove a very hard bargain, just one silly 2-inch mortar tube, and I didn’t even have to give them any ammunition!” His eyes were wide as he spoke, but he could see that Sergeant was in no way pleased.

“Just one 2-inch mortar….”

“They wanted a 3-inch tube, but I bargained very hard. Look Sergeant, it’s a Bren machine gun!”

“I can see that, you miserable goat! Where is the ammunition?”

“Right here. I insisted on three magazines.” The Private opened his pack to show off three of the classic curved top loading magazines that were characteristic of the Bren. It was a light weight, fast firing gun, using .303 ammo and very effective out to a range of 600 yards.

“Do you realize that gun is operated by a two man team? You are a trained sapper, not a machine gunner. What’s gotten into you?”

“But Sergeant, we already mined the bridges and set up wire. There was nothing else to do, but with this, I can attack them!”

“You will do no such thing. Take that gun to the Corporal over there immediately, and ask him which bunker he wants it in. Then come back here.”

“But Sergeant!”

“But nothing. Do as I have ordered. *Right now!”*

Frustrated, the Private saluted, and went trudging off to find his Corporal. The Sergeant shook his head. I will have to keep a much closer eye on that one, he thought. Wait until he gets back here and I ask him where he got that 2-inch mortar he traded. This is going to cost him a month’s salary. Maybe that will knock some sense into his silly head.

That afternoon the Germans did attack, dark uniformed men of the Prinz Eugen Mountain Division. They had come up the main road to Hamah and were trying to take the bridge over a small river, held by the men of the British 17th Brigade. The 32nd Indian Engineer battalion was right on the line, sandwiched in between the Northamptons on their left and the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders on their right. The Germans began with a good artillery prep against the Northampton Battalion, and then rolled it right over the Engineers.

With a full day’s hard labor, the Engineers had built some very sturdy strongpoints, and they weathered the shelling easily enough. But that was the first time Private Kapoor had been under direct fire, and he found it much more difficult than he imagined it would be. The Sergeant found him in a covered trench, standing boldly over the lad as he spoke to him.

“It’s lifting,” he said stoically. “Now the infantry comes. You just stay right there Packshee.”

The Moonbird stuck his head out of the trench, his face already stained with the dry earth. “If I had kept that 2-inch mortar, I could have fired it back at them, but that machine gun won’t do at all. You were right, Sergeant. I missed my chance.”

The Sergeant knew his Private was aching to strike a blow at the enemy, so he could say he fought hard here and earn his keep. As it was, all Packshee could do now was lay low, and he didn’t want the lad to feel like a coward, not during his first engagement.

The attack came in, and he unshouldered his rifle to fix his bayonet, waiting and watching behind a low sandbagged wall. The Northamptons took the worst of it, hit by two battalions of the 13th Mountain Regiment. Along the lines of the 32nd, they could hear the fighting loudly, but it wasn’t directed at their front. Then Private Kapoor pointed. They could soon see the British falling back, away from the bridge towards the outskirts of the town. He waited tensely, watching and listening, a well of fear building in the place

that had once been filled with all his excitement and anticipation.

The British had been driven back! In all his years in India, whenever the British troops were near at hand, the Moonbird would run to watch them, the tall, broad shouldered men that had made such a presence in his homeland for many long decades. His admiration for those soldiers had been the reason he wanted to join the army, and now, seeing them rushing to the rear was a shaking experience.

“Sergeant!” he said with an exasperated expression. “We spent half the morning laying charges on that bridge. Why didn’t they fire them off? They let the Germans take just it!”

“Things happen in battle,” said the Sergeant. “Not everything goes as we might wish.”

Now they heard the crack of 25 pounders, and the British guns began to find the range. It was a full a barrage from three battalions, falling first on the bridge sector, and then rolling west along the line of the river where the Germans had taken up positions. After a hot ten minutes, things quieted down, then the pop of mortar fire was heard, and there were shouts of alarm from their forward positions.

“Smoke!” the Corporal shouted, which set the Private to wave dismissively at the enemy beyond their lines. “It’s only smoke,” he said. “They’ve probably run out of ammunition.”

“Don’t be a fool, Packshee. They use that to cover their advance. Now we get our turn. Stay low.”

The Moonbird saw the Sergeant checking his rifle. The burly man waved his broad arm at a section on the right, and three men moved forward toward the bunkers. The sound of gunfire began, first rifles, then a terrible buzzing sound from hell that the Sergeant had heard too many times before, the dread German MG-42 machinegun. The Private stuck up his head, aghast when those rounds began biting into that forward strongpoint, right where the Corporal had told him to set up his Bren Gun.

Then he saw a big explosion there, and a sapper’s body was literally blown up and out of the entrenched position. He shirked in terror, biting his lip, and heard the deep throated sound of the enemy soldiers calling to one another. They were coming. The bunker had been hit with a panzerfaust, and the two man gun crew killed outright.

Sergeant Anandsubramanian whistled to his reserve squad, ordering them

forward. “Hold that bunker!”

The Private saw him rush forward, and his heart was pounding. There he was, cowering in a covered trench, the sound of battle all around him now, and it was a terrible sound indeed. He could hear the cries of wounded men, the earth shaking sound of explosions from mortar fire and grenades. But not one of the Engineers had reached the bunker yet, and no one was firing his prized Bren Gun back at the enemy.

He stared through the dust and smoke, seeing the broad figure of his Sergeant firing his rifle at the unseen enemy. Then something just snapped in him, driven by the fearful rush of adrenaline. He could not just sit there. Up ahead, he could see dark shadows looming in the smoke. They were coming!

Private Kapoor was up on his feet before he even knew what he was doing, and he ran for all he was worth. One of the fastest men in the platoon, he was so nimble afoot that he just leapt right over the next trench line where the Sergeant was rallying a squad, and he kept right on running toward that bunker.

“Packshee!” Came the Sergeant’s voice, a shrill edge in it that cut. But the Private kept running, leaping at last right into that strongpoint and looking wildly about to find his Bren Gun. It was laying there on one side, right next to the slumped bodies of two men, their tunics red with the stain of a bloody death.

Whether it was panic, courage, or insanity, it did not matter. Any of the three would have been equally fair reactions to the situation where he now found himself. What did matter was that the terrible energy that shook his frame now set his hands in motion. He seized that gun, setting the bipod legs right up on the edge of that bunker, and then he began to fire it, just as he had seen the British soldiers do, in short, sharp bursts. He fired at the shadows looming in that smoke, his eyes wide with both fear and excitement now.

Packshee was attacking the Germans!

The Sergeant could not believe what he had seen the young man do. He stood up and waved his men forward. *“Veera Madrassi, Adi Kollu, Adi Kollu!”*

The reserve squad rushed forward bravely, guns firing. They reached the bunker, where Packshee was still spitting fire at the oncoming enemy. To either side of that position, the other engineers looking on began to cheer and shout: *“Har Har Mahadev!”*

Then the Sergeant saw the cold evil shape of a potato masher grenade clatter off a wood beam, and grasped it as quickly as he could, hurling it back at the enemy. Then two dark shapes coalesced from the smoke and dust to become enemy soldiers. The Sergeant took the first with his bayonet, the second he wrestled with, bringing him to the ground, and all the while Packshee continued firing, and with very good discipline, realizing he was now on his last ammo cartridge.

There came a shout, and the strange sound of other voices calling in that guttural sounding language of the Germans. The shadows receded. Private Kapoor fired his last fierce burst, now out of ammunition, turning wide eyed to see blood all over the tunic of his Sergeant.

Thankfully, it was only the blood from his fallen enemy, and Packshee saw the long knife in his Sergeant's hand, the fire of rage in his eyes. They heard more harsh shouts. A machinegun buzzed at them, the rounds kicking into the sandbagged position.

"Back!" shouted the Sergeant, and he literally took the Private by his collar and hauled him out of that bunker. The smoke had rolled over them, obscuring everything, as Anandsubramanian dragged his charge along, three other men retired with him, all that was left of that squad. They reached the second trench line that the Private had leapt over earlier, and settled in, choking in the dust and gasping for breath.

They had abandoned that bunker none too soon, for another panzerfaust round came surging in, blasting the structure so badly that the wooden beams of the low roof collapsed. It had been fired for spite as much as anything else, because the German mountaineers were falling back. The crack of those British 25 pounders had dismayed them, and this attack was soon over.

There, still breathing hard in the trench, the Private looked up, wide eyed, at his Sergeant. "We attacked them! Didn't we Sergeant? Did we drive them away?"

The sergeant gave the young man a long look. He wanted to speak hard words, about discipline and following orders and remembering his training, but he said none of that. The boy in front of him had just crossed over that thin, yet palpable line that led him into manhood, and he smiled.

"*You* attacked them Packshee. We only came to help. I intend to go right to the Company Subedar and get you a medal! And when things settle down, we're going right back to that bunker so you can get your Bren Gun. Rest

now. Then you can go and look for some more ammunition."

The private bobbed his head, very happy.

Dusk could not come too early that day, the red sun falling through the haze and smoke of that battle. The Germans did not return. When the Northamptons gave way, the 32nd Sappers and Miners had held the line, and that night they would dig even deeper into the dry ground, their picks and shovels singing as they chinked against the stones.

The waxing gibbous moon sunk low on the horizon, setting very late, just before midnight. The men had eaten and rested from their long day's ordeal, and Anandsubramanian was sitting with his eyes closed, listening to the night. Then he heard the Moonbird singing, his voice high and bright, yet tinged with a deep sense of sadness, and the resolution of newfound purpose.

All his young life, Private Kapoor had been afraid of the Germans, which is why he had resolved that he simply must go and fight them. His father had told him the story of what happened in his home town of Madras in the first war, when the German raider *Emden* slipped into the port one night to raise hell. The Germans hit two oil tankers, causing a tremendous explosion that lit the city up with the rising flames. Then they had wantonly shelled the buildings near the harbor, hitting the National Bank of India, the Port Trust, Boat House, and Madras High Court. It was done as much to sew the seed of terror than to do any real harm, the only attack made on Indian soil during that first awful war. Terror did strike the city after that, causing many thousands to flee, and ever after the name *Emden* was synonymous with the fear raising skill of a daring enemy.

But Packshee wasn't afraid of the Germans any longer, and the Sergeant could hear that in his song. In that single unforgiving minute in the bunker, he had been changed, transformed, the boy becoming a man. There was no sound of fear in the Moonbird's voice as he sang that night. There was only sadness, resolution, and a deep understanding that could only be grasped in the sight of the blood that had been spilled in battle that day. But there was also joy in that song, acceptance; the song of a man who had finally found, and now knew, his place in the scheme of things.

The Moonbird sang…

“When I go from hence, let this be my parting word,
that what I have seen is unsurpassable...
Let this be my parting word…
Here have I caught sight of him who is formless.
My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with his touch who is beyond touch;
and if the end comes here,
let it come—let this be my parting word.”

Chapter 20

The Germans had taken the farming town of Salamiyar, midway between Homs and Hamah, and some 30 kilometers to the east. Good roads connected to each of those two cities, and so the town formed one point of an equilateral triangle. 4th Panzer was finally getting fueled up again and ready to move. 3rd Panzer had already moved through its lines to take the lead.

With the arrival of Kubler and his 1st Mountain Division by rail, that force was moving to relieve 10th Motorized. Hans Hube was a veteran of this fast maneuver warfare that Guderian wanted. Heavy set, serious in aspect and purpose, it had been his 16th Panzer Division that held the British at bay in Spain after their landings in Portugal. After that he had moved to Marseilles for transfer to Kesselring's command in North Africa, but when Guderian accepted command of Operation Phoenix, he made a direct request for the man.

The feint to the south was carried off just as we planned, he thought. It was only to buy us the time to get all of Kubler's mountain troops in position, and of course, to pull all the British reserves here to the Homs sector. Now it's time to run. I take the entire 14th Panzer Korps east now, right through Palmyra to the Euphrates. The Brandenburgers are already out there, and they will come under my overall command when we get close. With this force, I can take Iraq.

Hube's confidence was not boastful. The force he would have would outclass anything the British had east of Homs. The first to feel the bite of those panzers would be General Miles with his 56th Infantry Division. His troops had been posted all along the route of the Tripoli pipeline, centered on Palmyra, and that was where the action was moving now.

I/6th Panzer Battalion was in the lead, moving that night to a gap in the long line of hills that stood like an outer rampart shielding the T4 pumping station and facilities at Tiyas. The panzers swept through Bir Abu Qaylah, and quickly overran a company of light trucked infantry that had been watching the gap. Behind them came I/3 Panzergrenadier Battalion, and they would push hard to reach the T4 station by dawn.

The three panzer battalions in 6th Regiment each had 18 VK-55 Lions,

the earlier model with the 75mm main gun. The second company was composed of an equal number of the Pz-IV-F1s, also with a 75mm gun, though its velocity and hitting power was not as great as that on the VK-55. That did not really matter much, for the divisions had deployed with a preponderance of HE rounds when intelligence indicated they should expect very little in the way of armor from the other side.

So the lions moved east at dawn, General Westhoven closely monitoring the progress of his battalions on the radio. That initial spearhead would attack T4, supported by the motorized infantry regiment. A blocking force was posted on the road leading west to Homs to prevent any intervention from that direction, and then the second mechanized echelon, the 3rd Panzer Battalion, and one more Panzergrenadier battalion in halftracks, swung east of T4 and continued up the road to Palmyra.

A strong pinning attack was put in again by the Prinz Eugen Division, and this time the action was on the right flank of the position occupied by the 32nd Madras Engineers. Kubler had his division northeast of Homs, and he demonstrated strongly by pushing down the road from Salamiyar, and putting in a liberal dose of artillery. The intent was to fool the British into thinking the Germans were mounting a big offensive aimed at taking Homs, hoping they would see Hube's initial move at T4 as an attempt to outflank that city. That was how it would seem to Wavell on the morning of the15th, but the frantic radio calls coming in from T4 would soon change his mind.

* * *

"Damn!" The General swore, and deservingly so. The Germans had pushed into that gap as he had feared, but they had not turned west to envelop Homs as he first believed they would. They went right for the pipeline stations at T4.

"They've snookered us yet again—came right through that gap. Is Tiyas holding?"

"For the moment," said Anderson. "remember that Miles and his 56th also tangled with the Brandenburgers yesterday at As Suknah, right south of Tayyibah Pass. Could they be planning a pincer move on Palmyra?"

"It bloody well looks like it. Palmyra is the center of the board. From there they could turn about and come west again to Homs, or southwest for

Damascus."

"And east for Dier-ez-Zour," Anderson cautioned.

"And these are bloody panzer divisions. Miles had his lot of 6-Pounders, but if the Germans concentrate, his division won't hold."

"Perhaps they didn't think they could turn us here at Homs without dealing with the 56th Infantry first. After all, Miles would have been right on their backside if they had come for us."

"Right," said Wavell, sleepless and weary. "They want Palmyra, that's for certain."

A runner came in with the latest reports, saluting as he handed the message off to Anderson.

"It says here that the Germans relieved their 10th Motorized Division with another infantry force—1st Mountain Division. RAF says they spotted a lot of dust kicked up around the German positions, and heading east."

Wavell pursed his lips. "Palmyra. The whole bloody Corps is going to head east. By God, their infantry is just here to give us a nice big bear hug. They want to run all the way to the Euphrates. Any word on that regiment that slipped through at Tayyibah Pass?"

"Miles says he's posted a brigade east of Palmyra anchored on T3, but there's been no further movement in that direction."

"Because they don't think they'll even need the damn Regiment," said Wavell. "They're going to hit Miles with three divisions. That regiment of Brandenburgers east of Palmyra is just a path finder. In fact, it might even be continuing east towards Dier-ez-Zour as we speak, to join the rest of its division on the Euphrates. General, this is much bigger than we thought, and by God, I don't really think they want Syria and Lebanon back again. They want Iraq! They'll have the Brandenburgers out in front, and then this whole bloody panzer corps behind it. They could run all the way to Baghdad!"

"Well what in blazes are we going to do about it?"

"First off, " Wavell looked at the map. "Let's fight them for T4 on this end of things. Send word to 31st Armored. I want all the tanks they have to mount a counterattack up this main road. They might not get through, but Jerry will at least have to look over his shoulder. Then I think we need to give them a bone to chew on. We'll pull out of Hamah this morning. The marshland and canals north of Homs are easy ground to hold, and we should be able to extend our line east. I'll want the whole of the 31st Armored

Division in that attack I mentioned. We've got to make it more than a nuisance. If we can force them to watch their back, they may have to deploy one of those motorized divisions here, and that will weaken their drive for the Euphrates."

"Good enough," said Anderson. "I'll get the lads moving at once."

"And we'll want to notify Brigadier Kingstone directly. He's got the 10th Indian back of him, yes?"

"Yes sir."

"Well we'll be asking a good deal of them, a good deal indeed."

* * *

Glubb Pasha got hit hard that morning, and whether or not he held good ground, Duren's 3rd Brandenburg Regiment sent him and his Arab Legion packing. He pulled into Dier-ez Zour, disheartened, and with a truck full of wounded men from his light companies. He had served to merely delay the enemy by stealing the morning from them, but knew he could not hold.

"We've stuck our head in it here," he said to Brigadier Kingstone. "My scouts tell me that Jerry is coming at us from three sides now. The French couldn't stop them on the east bank either."

"And they've bloody well come up from the west as well," said Kingstone. "I sent two battalions and a company of armored cars out to see about it.

"Have they taken Palmyra?"

"Not yet, but that's what they're after. I just got off the radio with General Anderson. We should expect bad company soon if the 56th can't hold on to Palmyra, and the whole line of the Tripoli pipeline has gone to hell. Now we've just got the Haifa line, and its carrying all the oil O'Connor needs for 8th Army, and then some."

"Well they ran right past the French and are probably half way to As Suwar by now." Glubb folded his arms, quite unhappy.

"How could you possibly know that?"

"General, I've a little bird that flits about. Haven't I told you about it? But seriously, I was just up that river valley before I was recalled here, and I took the liberty of leaving a radio with the locals. You'd better have RAF take a better look."

Glubb was correct. The Lehr Regiment had motored on past the French, followed closely by Langen's 4th Regiment. Then a man rushed in with more bad news, only serving to sour Kingstone's already acerbic mood. The Germans had taken the airfield at Jubaylah, and now they were driving hard for the secondary field at Ayyash, That was just ten kilometers up the road from Dier-ez Zour." Kingstone's 4th Cav had dug in astride the road, but it was being hit with armored vehicles, the Panzerjager Battalion had twelve Panthers, six Marder IIIs, three Nashorn 88s, and three more mounted on halftracks. That was going to be more than the lightly armed cavalry could handle.

"My God," said Kingstone. "We thought those paratroopers of theirs were tough the first time around, but this motorized unit is a real nightmare."

"Brandenburg Division," said Glubb.

"I thought they were just small commando units?"

"They have those too, but this is a full division—tough as nails. They were the shock troops that the Germans threw at Volgograd. This is some of the best infantry they have."

"Well, the question now is whether or not we can hold this place. If they've already pushed as far east as Suwar on the Kahbur River, then what's to stop them from swinging right down to Hadithah? If they take that, then they've effectively cut both pipelines."

"Another runner came rushing in. "Sir! Jerry's got the bridge at Al Busayrah! Armored cars and motorized infantry."

"What?" Kingstone had a blank expression on his face. "That's damn well 25 kilometers behind us! Where's Blaxland and his bloody Indian Division?"

It was on that road, and heading for that very town and bridge over the Euphrates, at least a brigade was coming. The others were still strung out on the long road south, and one brigade had veered off and motored over to the T2 Pumping Station well west of the river. For all intents and purposes, King Force was virtually surrounded.

"They've thrown a bag over us. Glubb, can your people slow them down a bit? I think I'll have to take King Force south and retake that bridge. We should meet 10th Indian down there, and then perhaps we can make a stand. If we stay here, we'll be cut off and wanting ammo sooner than we think."

"I'll do whatever I can," said Glubb, casting a wan glance at that truck. "In the meantime, I've a good many wounded out there. Can you look after

them?”

He saluted, and was heading for the door, blowing out into the rising desert wind.

* * *

The T4 Station at Tiyas fell that afternoon, and the casualties were very heavy on the British side. Brigadier Lyne’s 169th Brigade lost two of its three infantry battalions, the rest of the brigade scattered south in a retreat that took it as far as Ain el Bards in the Jebel country. As Wavell had ordered, the 31st Indian Armored consolidated to begin its attack east along the pipeline, and this did force Guderian to halt 10th Motorized to stop them. While that was going on, the two panzer divisions pushed quickly onto Palmyra.

In modern times it came to be known as “The Bride of the Desert.” The old Roman ruins still remain, like the elegant Corinthian style colonnaded portico at the temple of Ba’al, dedicated to the storm god who might bring much needed rain to the parched desert around the settlement. A prominent trading site, the armies of the Romans, Sassanids, Muslims, Mamlukes, and eventually the Mongols all swept over the place as the centuries passed, each leaving some remains in the ruins that survived there.

In the early 21st Century, it was in the news yet again as the black flagged desert warriors of ISIS overran the place, with wanton brutality as they defaced more of the ancient artwork, especially the temple sites. The famous Temple of Ba’al would survive WWII, but not the ravages of ISIS in 2016. They would flatten all but one grand arch over the main entrance, destroying priceless ruins that had stood for centuries.

By the 1940s, the desire for exotic goods from the east had been distilled down to one primary thing—oil. The city sat right astride the long underground pipelines that carried the oil from Kirkuk, through Homs, to Tripoli and Banias on the Mediterranean coast. Fedorov and Troyak had once swept in on their helicopters to land upon the atop the high volcanic cone just west of the town, crowned by the old stone fortress of Fakhr-al-Din. Now it was manned by the 2nd London Irish. 10th Royal Berkshire Battalion held the old Roman tombs, and the 56th Royal engineers deployed just south of the Temple of Ba’al. They would not occupy it for fear that it might see the Germans resort to heavy weapons it.

The place was a small settlement, graced by shady groves of palm trees scattered amid the bleached skeletal bones of old fallen empires. Now the British Empire would strive with Huns of another sort, this time mounted in cold steel metal vehicles and tanks, their dark feldgrau uniforms blending into the evening shadows as they formed up west of the town. The history here was written in the sandstone, layered deep, and carved into the land over long millennia. Now another chapter would be written, the Second Battle of Palmyra.

4th South African Air Force Fighter Squadron had been operating there, but as the Germans approached, the pilots had leapt to their Kittyhawks and taken off. They howled overhead for a time, making a few strafing runs on the enemy columns and dueling with the German flak guns. Then they flew off east to the small landing strip at T2. Seeing the Brandenburgers disappear to the east, Brigadier Birch sent the bulk of his brigade west to reinforce the defense of Palmyra. It was there that General Miles and his 56th London Infantry Division would make their gallant stand.

Wavell was gambling that they could hold, or at the very least delay the German move east for a few more days. 46th Infantry Division had arrived, right on schedule at Suez, and he was already getting them onto the trains for the move into Palestine. That was a mixed division, and he would have a full Brigade of good armor when they arrived. Now what he wanted was one more mailed fist, and then he thought he might have a fighting chance at going on the offensive.

Time to pay a visit to General O’Connor, he thought. As much as he hated to do so, it was time to make good his threat to pick his pocket.

Chapter 21

New cards were dealt to both sides in the wild campaign now underway. The British received their 46th Mixed Division, with that brigade of much needed armor, and now Wavell flew all the way to Benghazi to meet with O'Connor.

"I know this is a lot to ask of you, particularly since we lost the brigade in that tragic accident. But we've two panzer divisions to contend with in Syria, and if we don't do something about that, they'll be in Iraq before we can finish our next cup of tea. Is there anything at all that you can send me?"

"Well I can't touch 7th Armored. I've positioned it well to the south. 23rd Armored Brigade has just deployed on the coast with 51st Highland Division. That's my hammer, and I really can't proceed without it. That leaves 1st Armored Division, if we can call it that. It's really only two brigades, the 2nd Armored and the 7th Motorized. I have it between the other two groups as a ready reserve, but I suppose I could detach 2nd Armored Brigade. That will mean I'll have to bring up 44th Home County. I was going to rest them, but there's nothing else for it. I don't suppose I could interest you in a South African Division? They're at the back end of the line, way south of Misrata."

"It's armor we need now," said Wavell. "Jerry is boxing our ears with those panzer divisions, and I've only two tank battalions in play, at least until I get 46th Infantry up. With one more tank brigade, I can counterattack. Otherwise, we just sit and try to parry what the other fellow does."

"Well General, you can have the 2nd Armored, but realize it's presently sitting some 700 miles from the railhead near Tobruk. That's a long slog, and I wouldn't vouch for that unit in combat after a march like that. Things fall apart, if you understand my meaning. It will take them five days to get to your trains, another day to load up, and then another on the rail lines into Palestine. After that they unload, get sorted out, and the maintenance operations can begin. Figure to have them in hand where you might want them to fight in two weeks."

"I see…" Wavell had hoped he might get something much sooner. He had been so preoccupied with the situation in Syria that he completely overlooked what O'Connor was doing, assuming 8th Army was in good hands. Now he

found that he had left no armored units in his rear areas, and the distances involved were daunting.

“You might trim off a few days if you can get shipping to Benghazi,” said O’Connor. “That’s just 500 miles on the road then, and then they could go by sea to Haifa. You’ll have to see about Cunningham covering that move, but I’m sure it could be done.”

He saw the weariness in Wavell now, and knew the burden of command was laying on him heavier than ever. By this time in the war, Wavell had long since been replaced in Fedorov’s history. He was hanging on because he was “in the know,” and Churchill wanted that circle to be a most exclusive club.

“I suppose we might use the shipping delivering the 46th Division. There should be enough there to lift tanks. But that 500 mile road march to Benghazi has me worried. I know what you say about the wear and tear on the vehicles. I just didn’t realize you had everything so far forward. We might find nothing more than a maintenance nightmare by the time they get to Benghazi.”

“Have you thought to pass the cup to Monty?”

“Montgomery? It never occurred to me.”

“Well he’s been getting regular convoys every other week, and one is due in to Algiers today.”

“Even if he had a thousand knights in silver armor, we’d never get them past Tunis and Sicily. That’s the heart of German air power on that front, and those straits are infested with enemy submarines.”

Wavell was quite discouraged when he left O’Connor, but bit his lip and resolved to do what he could with the single armored brigade attached to 46th Infantry. When he arrived back at Alexandria, eager to get the latest report on the situation he was facing, a clerk handed him a shipping schedule, which he nearly put aside to get at the latest combat reports. But he gave it a passing glance, seeing a most unexpected delivery was due in another two days.

“See here,” he said to the clerk. “What’s this about another Winston Special arriving on Monday? I haven’t heard a word about it.”

“Sorry sir. It was in the daily file, but you’ve been away at the front, and then off to Benghazi.”

“Has it been scheduled for debarkation?”

“Yes sir, all right and proper. But it will only need a day, as the Convoy

Master signaled that the unit was all combat loaded."

"Combat loaded? What unit?"

"Why it's right there, sir. 25th Tank."

Wavell flipped a page, squinting with that one good eye. There it was, the answer to his dilemma lost in a sheaf of paper in a plain manila folder on his desk!

"25th Tank Brigade?"

"A territorial unit sir, or at least it was."

Not everything leaving England in the last month was bound for Montgomery. A week after 46th Infantry Division departed for the Middle East, another unit that had been schedule for Montgomery was hung up on the docks because there would be no immediate need for it in North Africa. Monty had all the armor he could use on his front, and if it had been sent, he would have only put it into reserve for training while he advanced with his veteran units.

In late December of 1942, the 25th Tank had mustered at Liverpool, intended for deployment to Algeria. It was an old brigade with a new name, once a second line territorial unit in the UK, and now getting all new equipment for its first real foray into the war. The unit was composed of three tank 'Regiments,' which were really battalion sized formations with three squadrons of 18 tanks each. HQ troops with AA and support tanks fleshed it out a bit, and a battalion of twelve self-propelled 'Bishop' 25-Pounders was added, with a company of armored engineers. The main battle tanks in this unit were the Churchill IV, with an improved 75mm gun.

This TO& E would make it the most powerful armored force east of Suez, at least for the British. Wavell was flabbergasted. It was all right there, authorized by Churchill himself, and Wavell would later learn that it had been sent to try and fill the void when another brigade had been mysteriously lost in that terrible event at Tobruk. The Prime Minister knew that would likely effect things, and he wanted no further timidity on the part of his commanders. So instead of letting the 25th languish on the docks at Liverpool, he teed up a Winston Special and simply sent it to Wavell.

Wavell was beaming as he read the details. "The drunken Dutchess," he said with a smile. "Good for her."

One of the troopships assigned to carry the personnel in that convoy was the former Canadian steamship liner the *Dutchess of York,* often called the

“Drunken Dutchess,” a nickname given to the liner for its remarkable stability in heavy seas. It would roll heavily, but always stay on its feet. All the tanks were spread over twelve other merchantmen, and the convoy would be in Suez in another two days. There was his second mailed fist, and now he could face the Germans with two hands in the fight.

“Splendid!” he said to the clerk. “I want expedited offloading on that convoy, understand? Pull anyone needed, but I want it on the trains to Haifa the same day it arrives.”

A little gift from Churchill, thought Wavell, but little did he know that the gift giver was very close at hand, and would soon be paying him a most unexpected visit, to collect on the bill.

* * *

At that very moment, Churchill was meeting with President Roosevelt in the newly liberated port city of Casablanca to iron out the wrinkles in plans laid for 1943. Among other things, the two leaders agreed on a policy of absolute victory that would grant no terms to the enemy and insist upon unconditional surrender. In spite of Marshall’s push for a decision on the invasion of France, the British successfully argued that it was still far too early, and that operations in North Africa must be concluded first. They then suggested Sicily as the next target, aimed at knocking Italy out of the war.

When the Germans crossed the border into northern Syria, the news was met with some chagrin and growing alarm, especially by Churchill. He had it in mind to make a secret visit to Turkey that very month to press her hand in marriage, but now that seemed to be an impossible undertaking. Churchill was greatly offended, for the plans for the meeting had been arranged with the Turkish government for some time, and now he realized that, all the while, Turkey had remained a wayward bride, her infidelity glaringly revealed as German combat units had been moving on Turkish rails for the last week.

Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was with him, along with General Maitland Wilson, getting ready to take over in Iraq so that Alexander could be moved elsewhere. Churchill had planned to fly to Cairo from Casablanca to complete that move, which would come as yet another surprise for Wavell.

Deep down, the General could sense that something was up. The fact that he had not been asked to attend the Casablanca Conference was one clue. He thought that fortuitous at first, for that left him in Alexandria when the Germans crossed the Syrian border, but now he was to learn there was something more behind it. Churchill was planning to kill two birds with one stone in his visit to the Middle East. Now that the first had flown before he could take aim, he would settle for the bird he still had in hand, and meet with Wavell.

“General,” he said with as much warmth as he could muster, for he had found relations with Wavell somewhat strained at times. The two men retired to a secure room, but a moment later, Alan Brook came in through the back door, and greeted them both.

“Archie,” he said. “Good to see you.”

“And you, Sir Alan.”

“I’m afraid this won’t be a social call,” said Churchill. “And given the bad news we received with the opening of this new front, I thought, since I was close at hand, that I should come and see you about it.”

“Of course, sir,” said Wavell. “And oh yes, I must tell you that when I learned you had put the 25th Tank Brigade to sea for us I was most gratified. It will arrive in two days, and in the nick of time.”

“General,” said Brooke. “Just how bad is this new incursion? We’ve been locked away in smoke filled rooms at Casablanca.”

“It’s quite serious. They’ve hoodwinked us with this move through Turkey, and on that note, I suppose you received my messages concerning Turkish neutrality.”

Churchill had them in hand, but he had hoped to take no action on that until he had his visit with the Turkish government. That wasn’t going to happen now.

“That will be high on our agenda,” he said. “In fact, I hoped to be meeting with Ismet Inonii in just a few weeks, and this puts that in some jeopardy.”

“I should think so,” said Wavell. “Quite honestly, the Turkish frontier is a war zone now. It would be impossible to arrange security for such a visit, unless, of course, the Turkish officials might agree to come here.”

“They won’t,” said Churchill. “I proposed as much, and got a very cold shoulder. General, I think we’ve lost her, and that becomes a matter of the gravest concern. We sent a strongly worded reply to the Turks, but received

nothing in response. I might understand their position, what with the Germans sitting a stone's throw from Istanbul, and Ivan Volkov poised on their eastern borders. Everyone has to pick a side in this damn war, and it seems that the Turks have done so. Whether they formalize it or not, they've allowed German units to transit their territory, and on more than one occasion. Our patience has finally run out."

"Yes, and German aircraft are flying from Iskenderun and Gaziantep, and we've not been able to lift a finger against them."

"That will not be the case for long," said Churchill. "So lay it out for us. How many divisions are involved in this dirty business?"

"Four light infantry divisions, mostly mountain troops, but also four more mobile divisions—two of them panzers."

"I see… That's a full army, and more than we expected. Is it true that they've already reached the Euphrates?"

"Unfortunately so," said Wavell. "Quite frankly, I think they mean to push into Iraq."

"As we feared," said Brooke. "Well, can they?"

"At the moment, I've one mobile brigade under Brigadier Kingstone out there, and the 10th Indian Division under Baxland is only just arriving from Baghdad. There's also fighting for Palmyra. That's where the two panzer divisions went. Up until now, we've had just the infantry divisions, and the one Indian Armored Division, but it only has two battalions of tanks. So we've had to be stubborn with our infantry. We've got a fairly solid line inland from the coast at Tartus through Homs, but that's a very wide flank to the east, and the enemy has moved with alarming speed."

"Who's commanding on their side?"

"General Guderian, and he's no slouch."

Brooke raised an eyebrow. "Will you stop him?" he asked.

"Now that 46th Infantry is here, and thanks to the Prime Minister's foresight with that tank brigade, I believe we can hold Palestine and Lebanon secure. The problem now is going to be out east. Miles has the 56th at Palmyra, but Jerry has already roughed up one of his brigades pretty badly. I've organized a counterattack to try and get to him with the 31st Armored, but we'll need much more armor. Once these new arrivals get up from Haifa, then I can attack in force—perhaps five days."

"And if the Germans do have designs on Iraq?"

“We’ve only the four Indian divisions there, but I moved two of them into Syria. That action remains… unsettled.”

“Alright,” said Churchill. “We’ve come to the conclusion that this is far more serious than we first believed. The Germans have opened an entire new war front right under our noses, so we’ll have to really be on our game, or this could take a disastrous turn. Unfortunately, this will mean we’ll have to shake the tree out here, and I hope you’ll understand what I now propose—no, I’ll be plain with you sir, I’m going to make a change of command. I would like you to transfer to India forthwith, and take over planning for operations aimed at Burma and Ceylon. Now… You may take that on the chin as a slight, or evidence that we perceive you to have failed here, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Your service has been exemplary. You’ve saved Egypt, kicked the French out of Syria, and now you’ve set up O’Connor to do the same to the Italians in Libya. We owe you a great debt, but the situation in India is a bit loose these days. What we need is a good administrator, like yourself, to pull it together. Gandhi has been leading a movement against British rule, and there’s a good deal of sentiment that way. I want you to assume the role of something more than a simple commanding officer for that theater. I’ll be looking at you as the Viceroy of the entire colony.”

There… Churchill had spread as much frosting on the cake as he could, though Wavell was wise enough to know the real reasons for his transfer. In spite of a feeling of letdown, with this coming right in the middle of a crisis, he also felt that he needed a change. He was weary, more than he had ever been here in the desert, and perhaps the move would be good for him.

“Very well,” he said at last. “You’ve a way of holding my coat that is quite charming, Mister Prime Minister, but as I have in my mind nothing more than service to the Empire, I will gladly go wherever I am needed. May I ask who you have in mind for Middle East Command?”

“Alexander will return from Baghdad tomorrow, and Archie, it isn’t so much that we think a change is needed here. Alexander’s a good man for this sort of thing, and he can take up the reins here easily enough. But I was thinking of sending him to India, and he’s not quite right for that post, even if he has had experience there. The Japanese ran him out of Rangoon, and nearly captured him in the process. Now they’ve pushed us all the way back into India. Slim’s a good man over there, and we thought you were the best

man to step in now and sort things out. Understand?”

“Of course,” said Wavell.

And that was that, another of those unforgiving minutes that would reset Wavell’s life from this day forward.

Part VIII

Friends and Enemies

"Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer."

—Vito Corleone: *The Godfather*

Chapter 22

“You mean to say you joined these people—took up sides? You’ve actually engaged in combat here?”

“It was inevitable,” said Harada, trying to sort through the fallen dominoes in his mind. “We went through the same shock you just experienced. We discussed our situation, realized where we were and what we might do. Then decided to try and approach the IJN to see if we could dissuade them from proceeding with this war.”

“We had no choice,” said Fukada. “This ship only has so much fuel. We had no way of knowing how we might ever get home—to our own time. So when that fuel ran out we’d just be sitting there, a warship dead in the water like a duck in a pond. Who was going to give us that fuel, the United States Navy? Were we to throw in with them? How would any of us ever have gone home to Japan again after that?”

Admiral Kita thought about that, suddenly understanding what these men had been through. Here he was, caught in the very same web that had ensnared them, and faced with the very same choices. They had checked all their charts, and there was no mistaking that island out there, Elugelab, the place that Ivy Mike vaporized long ago. They had overflown Eniwetok as Harada had advised. It was not the modern base they knew, and there, at Parry Field, was the small seaplane base that Japan had set up soon after their initial occupation. They had boarded the tanker *Kazahaya,* seen the curious crewman, interviewed the ship’s Captain. It was just as Harada said it would be. Everything they heard and saw would confirm the impossible conclusion that they were no longer in their own time.

How this could have happened was the next question, the mind reaching for understanding that it would never really find. It could not be answered. The clues were there in those aerial contacts that came from seeming nowhere, F-84 Jet aircraft lost in the dizzy upwelling of doom, the seething column of Ivy Mike as it rose into the sky. They were there, then gone, as if they had only slipped briefly into this world of 1943 before returning to their own era. Why time would grant them such license could not be known. Why she would have instead pulled all these ships into the vortex that opened

when Ivy Mike exploded, could not be known. It had simply happened. It could not be reasoned with, explained, or ever understood, but now it was reality, and one the Admiral would have to face, along with every crew member in his task force.

“We went to Yamamoto,” said Harada. “We thought that if we could get to someone like him, and convince him of the futility of this war, then we might build a better future for Japan in our time.”

“You actually spoke with him? Isoroku Yamamoto?”

“We did, and his Chief of Staff, Admiral Ugaki. That one is hard as steel. Yamamoto listened to us. I even showed him the end of this war in our ship’s library. Yet one thing led to another…”

“There’s something else you need to know,” said Fukada, casting a dark glance at Harada. “We aren’t alone here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we are not the only ship from our own time to appear here. Crazy as it may sound, the Russians are here as well.”

“What?”

“Remember that ship that went missing in the Norwegian Sea just before we deployed for those exercises with the Australians?”

“You mean the Russian battlecruiser? Yes it went missing, then it showed up again in the Pacific, until that Demon Volcano in the Kuriles blew it to *jigoku*.”

“Yes sir—*Kirov*. Well, it wasn’t sent to hell, nor even destroy

“But Krakatoa never erupted in 1943,” said Kita, “and it didn

“It did here, sir. Damn thing nearly wiped out the 2nd Sendai

“Here? In the Pacific?”

“Correct,” said Harada. “In fact, there’s a good deal more you need to know, and it’s going to be every bit as crazy as the rest. We’ve discovered that the history here has already been radically altered. It looks like the Strike North faction in our government prevailed long ago, because the Japan of this day has not only occupied Manchuria and the coast of China, but it’s also taken Vladivostok, most of Sakhalin Island and other parts of Siberia all the way up to Chita, beyond the Amur River.”

They told Kita everything they had learned, and then explained what the Russians had been doing with their ship, threatening Japan to recover their lost territories, and actually engaging the IJN in open combat.

“The Russian ship sunk the *Hiryu?”*

“Yamamoto told us so. The missile tech understandably came as quite a shock to them. So when he saw what we could do with our own missiles, he asked us to go up against *Kirov*. We did what we could, but that’s a formidable ship. We tried to ambush them before they knew we were here, and got off all eight of our Type 12s, but they stopped them. Then they threw a good deal back at us. I can now vouch for the American SM-2s, though it cost us 33 missiles, and we had to use the laser system too. They threw a hypersonic missile at us as a final warning—probably a Zircon.”

Admiral Kita shook his head in utter dismay. *“Zettai ni! Dôshi*
“I’m sorry sir,” said Harada. “We know exactly how you must fe
“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” said Fu
“Settle it? You mean *Kirov?”*
“Of course, sir. You aren’t going to just let the Russians hav
It was coming at Admiral Kita too fast. He needed time to thin
“Have you also engaged the American Navy here?”
“Only in a defensive situation,” said Harada. “We’ve taken out
“You intervened? Which battle?”
“This action was not recorded in our history. As we tried to t
“I see… What were you doing here at Eniwetok?”
“We were ordered home to Yokohama. Admiral Yamamoto did not gi
“Osami Nagano? Fleet Admiral for the entire Imperial Navy? I c
“That will pass,” said Fukada. “And the sooner you realize wha
“That will be all, Lieutenant Commander,” said Harada. He coul
Admiral Kita looked from one to the other. “Tell me I will awa
“I’ve wished that many times myself in the last nine months,”
“You are suggesting I begin active operations here against the
“Yes sir, it’s completely insane, but that is what you will ha
“The Russians….”
“They had no difficulty in knowing what they should do,” said
“Have you both considered the consequences of all this? Every
“No sir,” said Fukada, “we do not, but neither do the Russians
“How ironic,” said Kita. “If I were to fight now on the side o
“We considered that,” said Harada. “But face it, Admiral, do y
“Yes…” said Kita, a distant look in his eye. “Tojo, the Army,
“It doesn’t have to be that way now sir,” said Fukada. “The wh
“Are you so sure?” said Kita. “If we sunk what they have afloa
“That would be months, even a year or more trying to get back
“Karpov? Yes, he was in command when they sortied with the Red
“They aren’t here, sir,” said Harada. “As far as we’ve been ab
“Yes… *Kirov* is a problem if it really is here, and out to do w
“It has to be stopped, sir,” said Fukada. “*Takami* couldn’t do
“Alright, the first thing to do now is get the rest of the Tas

“And if they decide not to intervene? What then?”
“Good question. I’ll have to ask everyone to think on that, an
That meeting would become a five hour marathon, and the decisi

Chapter 23

The decision took another full day, and the shock of what had
The force that Admiral Kita would now command was well up to t
Fukada thought they now had *Kirov* beat in the SSM category, bu
Where it came to SAMs, however, the Japanese now enjoyed an ad
But it would not merely be a question of surface ships firing
The carriers were a real game changer now, but there were stil

* * *

“So you are up to the same old game here, yes Captain? That is
They had all agreed to a truce by secure radio transmission, e
Fedorov chose a tiny atoll well east of Truk called Pingelap.
“Don’t think to lecture me here,” said Karpov. “Much has chan
“Quite the contrary,” said Volsky. “I am aware of *everything* t
“Let’s not tussle over that like a pair of hungry dogs with a
“Yes….” Volsky’s eyes darkened. “I remember that as well. Beli
“Come now,” said Karpov. “You cannot lay the blame for all of
“Not at all, I remember that man as well.” Volsky pointed to h
“You mean you also recall our original mission? You remember t
“Of course, and all that followed. And I seem to recall you ma
Karpov had deliberately prodded the Admiral to see if he reall
“Well Admiral, do you also recall a little meeting you and I h
“Of course,” said Volsky.
“You offered me something there at the end, do you recall it?”
“Offered you something?” Volsky thought for a moment, then smi
Karpov nodded. That was something Fedorov would have no knowle
“Alright,” said Karpov. “We have business to discuss.”
“Fedorov tells me you have agreed that we must move the ship f
“Yes, I agreed,” said Karpov, “but to which time? Which world
“A good question,” said Fedorov.
“Remember what I said earlier aboard *Kirov?* How can we move fo

‘If we do this—shift forward—where in God’s name do you think we’ll end up? Did Kamenski talk about that?... Which 2021—from which meridian? Will we arrive back where we first started? Will we reach the future we may be building now on this altered meridian? Was that where Gromyko shifted in from with Volsky? Did you hear what he said? Volsky has a ***third*** *layer of memories in that old head of his. He said he was just sitting at his desk at Red Banner Fleet headquarters when in walked Kamenski. How*

*could he be doing that, when we both know he was supposed to be aboard Kirov? That means that timeline was not the original one we came from. It was a **third** world.'*

'So let's explore this further. Was Kirov in that world along

Too many unanswered questions indeed.

"I don't think we can answer that," said Fedorov. "It's not so

"Yes, yes… the busy Mother Time," said Karpov. "Won't this cre

"Time will do everything possible to prevent that."

"And perhaps everything *impossible* as well," said Karpov. "For

"I thought you agreed that we would do this—move forward to th

"Yes, I agreed," said Karpov. "I merely point out the difficul

"But you may get back to the time line where you originated,"

"You believe Time is going to put all the shoes back in the co

"It's all she could do," said Fedorov. "Each of us will get to

"That may be well and good for you," said Karpov. "The Admiral

"He'll get to his world, the one he came from, and you'll get

"Perhaps, but I've already seen that world. I told you I went

"It's either that or we get to the dirty business here," said

Karpov gave him a long look. "Do you really want to lock horns

Gromyko remained cool, calmly folding his arms. "I could ask y

"Look," Fedorov intervened. "This gets us nowhere. Whatever we

"Good," said Karpov. "No wild bear hunt for Orlov this time. I

"Then we will have to persuade him," said Volsky, "and you, Mi

"My, Admiral, you've certainly changed colors concerning the n

"Perhaps the threat alone would be sufficient," said Volsky.

"If we make such a threat," said Fedorov. "Then Volkov would p

"Oh, I'll find him," said Karpov. "My man Tyrenkov is very cle

"And then just nuke the location? He's not stupid. You know he

"Don't get squeamish on us now, Fedorov," said Karpov.

"That's not my being squeamish. It's just common sense. We've

"I suppose you have a point there," said Volsky. "Very well, b

"Volkov?" Karpov laughed at that. "No, I think he is too roote

"I see," said Volsky. "And are you ready to give up your Free

Karpov gave him a narrow eyed stare.

Chapter 24

Admiral Kita looked over the results for some time. The vote w
The second question was more difficult—*assuming we prevail aga*
In the end, the measure passed by only five percentage points.
When the decision was finally announced, Admiral Kita convened
“We are expected to escort that tanker out there to Yokohama,”
The Admiral wanted to be very careful here. His instinct was n
“I will second that,” said Harada. “We told Yamamoto that we w
“Should we then inform Admiral Yamamoto that you will not arri
“If I may, sir, I think I can handle that directly. But this r
“It is not far from the truth,” said Kita. “All these weapons
“Quite true, sir. I should also say that our missiles have alr
“That is understandable,” said Kita. “We might be able to pick
The general consensus was that they would almost have to remai
“I think I can explain this to Yamamoto,” said Harada. “When w
“It is that defeat we hope to prevent,” said Fukada.

Captain Yoshida took note of that, even as he had when he first engaged the Chinese fleet. War started with flags and honor, national pride, and music, but it always ended in the same thing—death and destruction. His planes were not made of canvass and steel any longer, or even aluminum, but now became artful contoured compositions of carbon nanotube reinforced epoxy. However they were made, their intention was simple in the end—find and kill the enemy before they did the same to you. That was the order of the day they were taking on, and it gave him no joy to think he would be killing the ancestors of the men who stood by Japan for well over half a century. He had secretly voted to remain neutral here, but now he steeled himself for the fight ahead. How to prevent the inevitable defeat of Japan in this war?

“Yet that is a high mountain,” said Kita. “These men started t
Captain Asano off the *Kongo* spoke next, a trim professional of
“Yes,” said Harada. “Yamamoto knows that as well. He knew it b
“Unless we stop them,” said Fukada.
Admiral Kita turned to regard him. “You’ve been rather eager h
“We know the approximate delivery dates for each ship they hav
That raised a few eyebrows before Captain Namura off the *Kiris*
“We don’t need to hit them all,” said Fukada. “We only need to
“So you are suggesting we move to the Atlantic? Another Pearl
“We could do this,” said Fukada. “We take out the Panama Canal
“Very optimistic,” said Kita. “And what about their Atomic Bom
“Sir, we know where that program is being developed, and we ca

“The combat radius of the F-35B is just over 800 Kilometers,”
We can use the Osprey’s for mid-air refueling,” said Fukada,
Fukada was seeing things at the strategic root. While many of
Admiral Kita took a long breath. “What do the rest of you thin
“He makes a strong argument.” It was Captain Daishin Tachino,
“My job is logistics and support. We’ve come a long way to ge
“Is there a way north?”
“Yes, but its January, a little cold up there.” Tachino tapped
“What if we head West?” Fukada suggested. “We can go to Yamamo
“Yamamoto?” Admiral Kita nodded his head. “It seems that wheth
“Yet it could also help solve this problem,” said Harada. “We
Captain Tachino pulled up the data in a few seconds. “About 11
“Those seas will be in the U.S. sphere of influence,” said Kit
“We can defend ourselves,” said Fukada.
“True, but the tankers Yamamoto would have to send would need
“Gentlemen,” said Kita, “we’re getting ahead of ourselves with
“It was just off Truk two days ago,” said Harada. “We might he

Part IX

St. Michael's Cave

"This cave seems to have been formed by the violent concussion that rent "the Rock" mid-way between Signal Station and rock gun battery, near Middle Hill, evident marks of the disturbance being found. Turning to the long celebrated and far-famed cave of St. Michael, we find traces of the disturbance… probably formed by the same violent force of upheaval, as the axes of fracture of all are nearly in line. Wishing to solve certain doubts, and the truth of certain rumors respecting this cave, I determined upon a careful exploration…"

—Lt. Alexander B. Brown, *Geology of Gibraltar*

Chapter 25

It was an ancient network of limestone caves, its entrance per
Ages ago, prehistoric human left the traces of their rudimenta
The ancient Greeks and Romans knew the place, for it was menti
Over the years, many had probed into the deep recesses of the
Eventually, the place came to be seen as just another part of
They were not the only men to vanish within the labyrinthine p
When the second great war came, the place had been designated
One day, the cave would become a tourist venue for over a mill
After losing the Rock in 1941, now Great Britain had her priz
To reach it, a small troop of men and women formed up on the *A*
“Look at the walls,” said MacRae. “All wet with flowing water.
“Step through here,” said Morgan. “I’ve toured this place in o
“Won’t there be places that the men of this era have yet to un
“Perhaps,” said Morgan. “A pity we can’t just use GPS to get t
“That would be risky,” said Elena. “After all, whatever we fin
“Aye,” said MacRae. “Then let’s get to the radar sets, and hav
Morgan was already huddling with the Argonauts, seeming to be
The suit exterior was also photo sensitive, and could be progr
Every man in the ten man team was connected wirelessly, and th
“This section here looks promising,” said Morgan. “Look at tha
“How deep is it?” asked Elena.
“It looks to be thirty feet beneath us… About there.” He point
“No good trying to dig that deep,” said Elena, and she looked
MacRae inclined his head. “Care to elaborate on that?”
Elena thought for a moment. “Remember that story I told you ab
“What sort of things?”
Elena smiled. “The man claimed he fought the Germans at Gibral
“Ah…” said MacRae. “I remember that now.” The recollection of

“Someone sends you a message—Tovey himself from all accounts,” he remembered himself saying to her. *“He sends you off to Delphi, and for what? That bloody box, that’s what. It brings the ship here, and gives us a shot at getting our hands on the key that went missing from the Elgin Marbles. I won’t ask how you knew about it, but there it is. Then, out of thin air, this Russian Captain produces yet another key. Some bloody fine rabbit he pulled out of his hat. And that was rather dramatic when he honed in on those engraved numbers being geographic coordinates. The key we lost on Rodney was supposed to open, or secure something in St. Michael’s Cave... I wonder what’s been hidden there, another of those thick metal doors and*

underground passages?"

"Those caves get very deep," said Elena, "and there are segments that have not yet been fully excavated. But… there is one thing more I can tell you. It happened a year before we set out on this mission… A man stumbled into a bar in Ceuta harbor, right south of Gibraltar across the straits. He claimed the Germans had taken the Rock, but that he had found a way out. Said he was a British Sergeant fighting there when it happened, at least that was the story in the police report. They assumed he had one too many that night, and that he was just a vagrant sailor off a tramp steamer, but nobody claimed him when the authorities contacted the ships in port that day. He had no passport, but did carry some authentic looking documents—a ration book, right from the war—this war."

"How did this come to your attention?"

"It was just one of those odd stories that bounced around the web for a day or two, but somebody in British intelligence got curious about this fellow's tale. They got hold of that police report. The fellow had it chapter and verse. His name was in the register of troops assigned to garrison duty at Gibraltar in 1940."

"Anybody could have gotten hold of that kind of information."

"True, but his story included a few details that now strike a nerve or two. The man said he was up on Windmill Hill Flats, above Europa Road, when a British battleship ran the straits and shelled German positions in and around the harbor. After that, they got the order to withdraw to St. Michael's Cave. Ring a bell?"

Those were details that were suddenly transformed from witless fancy to gospel truth after they arrived here. For this was an altered meridian, a changed historical account of the war. Now MacRae realized that that man was reporting details of events they had clearly seen happen here, and with that he realized that the British Sergeant must have come from this very same time—from this same bloody cave where he was standing right now. But how did he turn up in 2020, and still remain a man of thirty years?

The answer was as obvious as his own presence there, for he was a man of that era, yet marooned here in the 1940s. He traveled in time…. *The bloody British Sergeant traveled in time!* It was either that, or he had one wildly accurate imagination, recounting events like the daring sortie by the battleship *Valiant* to shell the Germans on the Rock during their Operation

Felix. It was eerie, and it could be no coincidence. They were, at that very moment, engaged in a hunt to find something that had been hidden here in St. Michael's Cave, just like that little side trip to the Oracle at Delphi that landed the *Argos Fire* here.

"Then this man Hobson found what we're looking for," he said to Elena, his eyes dark and serious.

"It seems so."

"And he didn't have to use all this equipment to do so."

"That's what's been bothering me," said Elena. "We naturally came down here, as deep as we could get to the newly discovered galleries of the cave site. But now I realize that these areas were not even discovered until 1942."

"Aye, so that British Sergeant couldn't have found anything down here. Then where would he have been back in '41 when the Germans were coming for them?"

They looked at one another, then MacRae turned to his own Sergeant Keller, whistling. "Sergeant, secure this operation and get the men back to the upper gallery—on the double."

Mack Morgan came over, a question in his eyes. "What's up?"

"We're not in the right spot," said Elena. "The search has to start in the old cave site, not the new galleries here."

"But this lot is much deeper."

"Yes, but it won't get us where we need to go."

"With all due respect, Mum, what makes you so sure of that?"

Elena simply smiled at him. "A British Sergeant told me so."

Chapter 26

It wasn't unusual to find a Barbary Ape roosting about the stony slopes of the Rock. They were fond of the place long before the British came in 1704, and the British Army took to supervising them and even providing a daily food ration of fruit and nuts. Living mostly on the eastern heights, the little troops began to range more freely over time. By 2021, they were among the top tourist attractions on Gibraltar, and a law had to be passed forbidding the feeding of any Macaque to prevent them from foraging in the town.

In 1942 there was only one small troop of seven monkeys on the Rock when the Germans had the place, and they fled, fulfilling the legend that Britain would hold the Rock only if the Apes were there. Once it was taken back by Montgomery, Churchill insisted that the population of Macaques be increased, issuing orders to troops in Morocco and Algeria to round up the monkeys and send them to Gibraltar.

Three troops now inhabited the place, content to live under British rule again, and deemed "loyal subjects of the Crown." Yet it was most unusual to find one in the lower galleries of the cave systems, particularly here, in St. Michael's Cave. Elena stared at the little fellow they encountered, quite curious.

They had moved through the Stalagmite Halls out of New St. Michael's Cave, and then through the feature known as the Great Rift, seeing nothing unusual. This took them very near the entrance to the New Caves, where a winding hole called The Corkscrew burrowed straight down, connecting to the lower galleries of the old cave system. These were as deep as those in the new cave site, so they descended into a chamber known as The Grotto to continue their search. About mid-way through the lower series, they encountered the Barbary Ape, intent on something it was eating.

"How did he get down here?" asked Elena.

"Probably the same way we did," said Morgan.

The bright helmet mounted flashlights on the Argonauts, and perhaps their strange appearance in those TALOS suits, were suddenly enough to send the beast looking for safer ground. He scampered away, and when they reached the spot where he had been, Elena stooped to pick up a remnant of

the food he had been eating.

“Chocolate?”

“Probably a treat from one of the garrison soldiers,” said MacRae. “The rascal didn’t want to share it with his troop, and came down here for a little private feast.”

Then they found it, the dull brown wrapper, torn but largely intact, and there, written prominently across the front in green italic letters, it read “Milky Way.” A small oval below this indicated this was the “fun size.”

“How did he get hold of that?” said Elena. “Isn’t that an American candy bar?”

They stared at one another, until Miss Fairchild produced a tab device and looked it up. The Mars Candy Company, created by the family of the same name, was 100 years old and a worldwide operation with over $100 million in annual sales for that single product, only one revenue stream in its $33 Billion annual haul. In Europe the treat was simply called the “Mars Bar,” so finding this one here was most unusual, and a closer look at the crumpled candy bar wrapper sent Elena’s pulse into another gear.

“Did any of the men bring this in here?”

She was most insistent, but the entire squad was grilled and no one admitted to the crime. “Damn!” she exclaimed more than swore, her voice edged with a sense of awe. “Look at this. First off, this wrapper wouldn’t have looked like this in 1942. The original wrappers were white, as in this image I called up. Now look under that flap at the bottom. Get some more light over here.”

Three Argonauts leaned in around the others, focusing their helmet lights, and Elena squinted. “Can’t make it out,” she said, frustrated. Then the eagle-eyed Mac Morgan reached for the wrapper and was able to read the fine print.

“It’s just marketing drivel,” he began. “Says ‘we value your questions and comments. Call…” he stopped short. “Good Lord…. It lists an 800 telephone number and a bloody web address… milkywaybar.com!” He looked at the others, completely befuddled. “Are you certain none of the men brought this in here?”

Elena looked from Morgan to Captain MacRae, then wheeled about to find Sergeant Keller. “Find that monkey,” she said. “Now.”

Two of the men had seen it scamper down into the cave feature known as the Prison. Morgan had been using a map reference to guide them, and he had

also called up a document created during an earlier geological survey of these caves. One Captain Jerome and a Doctor Jackson of the 86th Regiment, with Sergeant Hanson and Bombardier Robert Smith of the Royal Artillery, had written up extensive notes.

“They once thought this feature was the lowermost end of things here,” he said, then read from his pad: “All preceding explorers had arrived at the conclusion that ‘the Prison’ was the extreme end of this cavern, and it was only by means of great labor, and care, that we were enabled to prove the contrary. The axis of fracture, the lines of stratification, and above all the currents of air which were manifest… together with the sound, convinced me that there were other large caverns in this wonderful fissure, beyond the one we were in now…”

“That would be Hanson’s Cave up ahead,” said MacRae, named for that Sergeant he had with him that day.”

“Beyond that we get Brown’s seat, a shelf of stone where he believed this entire fissure ended. He said it looked to be impenetrable by any normal means of exploration.”

“Well that Macaque went this way, we all saw him. Have the men turned anything up?”

No trace of the beast had been found, which left the party with an unsettled feeling of mystery here. They were certain the monkey did not get past them. In fact, the men heard it making sounds up ahead of them, but could find no trace of the rascal.

“What’s directly above us?” asked Elena, eyeing the toothy falls of stalactites from the roof of the chamber.

“Lenora’s Cave,” said Morgan. “Then the Bell Chamber.”

“Lenora’s cave…” that rang a bell in Elena’s mind. “Wasn’t that the cave that was said to lead to the hidden tunnel under the Straits of Gibraltar?”

“Just an old tale,” said Morgan.

“You know they once thought this place was bottomless,” she said. “Let’s do a radar scan of the entire area near Brown’s seat—that shelf of rock over there. Look high and low.”

MacRae was looking at his compass, and now he held it out to the others. “Damn thing has gone bonkers,” he said. It was spinning this way and that, unable to find true north.

“This Lieutenant Brown mentions that as well,” said Morgan, reading

again… “The fact of the magnetic needle being slightly deflected in some places, shows evidently strong traces of iron in the cave.”

“Well this is more than slightly deflected,” said MacRae. “It’s spinning about like a top now.”

“A magnetic anomaly, and well beneath Lenora’s Cave,” said Elena. “A missing Barbary Ape that had to have found some way forward from this point. Gentlemen, get busy.”

The ten man squad fanned out, their helmet lamps searching all the ground ahead. They nosed around the twisted pillars of limestone extending up from the floor, and probed with files and other tooling at the walls. Three men had the hand held ground penetrating radar sets, and it wasn’t long before they scanned some very interesting returns.

“I was expecting a solid mass,” said Morgan. “You know, one of those well machined doors like we found at Delphi, but this is reading quite the opposite. That monkey is on to something here. That big rock there reads solid, but these readings show a void beyond that stone.”

They were, in fact, standing before the very same stone where Sergeant Hobson had been prompted to get after the Barbary Ape the previous year, though none of them knew that at the moment. The Argonauts searched the sides of the rock, but it appeared to be emerging directly from the scored limestone wall behind it. Then they got perhaps the same break that had led Sergeant Hobson on. There came a skittering sound, and then something fell right onto the bill of the helmet worn by MacRae. He reached up, thinking to brush away some small lose stone fragment, but instead he was amazed to see a peanut shell fall to the cave floor, right between the toes of his boots. He stooped, confirming his find, and handing it to Elena, and now all eyes looked up, the beams of the ten helmets suddenly catching the amber glow of two eyes, cat like, in the shadow of the upper rock where it approached the wall. Then they vanished.

“There’s the little beastie,” said MacRae. “Come on lads, get that folded ladder up.”

It took all of five minutes, but Sergeant Keller led the way up, noting scratches on the rock as he went. At the very top, it first seemed that there was no way to proceed, but as he eased himself to the place where they had seen the Macaque, he called down.

“A break on the rock up here,” he said. “But I don’t think I can get

through.” It was too small for the broad chested Sergeant, but they had a smaller man in the team, and he climbed up to the place, and was barely able to squeeze through.

“A very narrow passage,” he said. “I’ll have to slide through on my back.” For a time, Corporal James was only able to move by squirming on his back and using his shoulder blades to keep him going, but gradually, the passage opened up a bit. They heard him calling, seeming very distant now, his voice becoming a slight echo of itself.

“Switch to your helmet radio,” said the Sergeant.

Morgan looked at Elena. “Well I think we’re on to something here. Is it another chamber, Sergeant?”

“No sir, my man James says it’s more of a long passage, very winding, and the walls are scored with well faulted rock. He says it resembles Hell’s Throat.”

“That’s the bottomless pit you were talking about,” said Morgan. “When the Moors had the place, they said it was often used to hide treasure when outside forces were threatening to take the Rock from them. Many have tried to find it, and there are a few ‘Grandfather’s tales’ about Hell’s Throat. I read up on one the other night when we were prepping for this mission.”

“Let’s hear it,” said Elena.

“Well, Mum, it concerns a British soldier, Grimsby by name, who had a friend named Peter Provost who was led to Hell’s Throat by a couple of Moors. They threw in a torch, and it fell away to a mere spark before it vanished. Then they threw in stones, which clattered down and down until they could hear no further sound. Hence the rumors about that drop being bottomless. Well, this Provost fellow decided to rig out some ropes and climb down for a look. About ninety feet down, he came to a shelf of stone big enough for him to stand and walk along its edge. It led him to an aperture in the walls of the throat, and that opened onto a passage—or so he claimed. The man got marooned there when the two Moors that led him to the spot heard British soldiers coming and fled, dropping the rope that was tied fast to this Provost fellow. The rope fell over the brink into the abyss, and the man was stranded over 90 feet down.”

“Poor fellow,” said Elena. “How did he get out?”

“That’s the odd part,” said Morgan. “There was an attack on the British contingent by men from the Spanish Camp at nearby Son Roque. The two

sides were always at each other's throats. Well, this man Grimsby was taken prisoner, and transported out to a Spanish P.O.W. ship anchored in the bay. The Spaniards were trying to blockade the Rock with a little fleet out there, but here's the strange twist in all of this. Days later, a boat arrived from Morocco, delivering yet another prisoner to that ship, and lo and behold, it was this Peter Provost, recognized immediately by Grimsby, in spite of the fact that he seemed dazed and haggard. The Moors said he had been found wandering the hills behind a village—on Ape's Hill, in Morocco!"

"This is sounding all too familiar," said Elena. "Was there anything else to the story?"

"Grimsby said that Provost was babbling on and on about pillars of fire, utter nonsense, but he did manage to extract something of what may have happened to him. In desperation, the man apparently followed a deep subterranean passage, which continued to descend for some time before it eventually turned up again. He was down to his last torch, which eventually guttered out, but in that eerie darkness, probing along with a walking stick, he claimed that a strange greenish glow was seen all about him, just enough for him to make way. All the while, he claimed he could hear the sound of water, high overhead. It wasn't a dribble like the seepage that formed these stalactites, but the deep swell of some great body of water. So you know where this is going, aye?"

"The hidden passage under the Straits of Gibraltar," said Elena.

"Aye, and it was said that Provost came upon a mummy of a Moor, a dagger still embedded in its bony chest, and saw two jars, both empty, but with a scatter of gold coins on the stony floor of the passage. By the time he was found, Provost was not in his right mind, but he continued to babble on about this hidden passage to the Spaniards, thinking they might be interested in it as a way into the Rock. They paid him no mind, and it seems he was never quite right in his own head again after that—assuming any of this can be believed."

"Interesting," said Elena. "Your map shows this cave is very near that place—Hell's Throat. I think we'd best tell our Corporal to scout that passage out. Anyone else care to try and get through that gap up there? Let's get some tooling up and see if we can widen it."

Sergeant Keller told the Corporal to survey the way ahead and see how big the fissure was. The report came back that it was now beginning to

descend, steeply in places, and as yet there was still no sign of the Macaque. It was then that Keller gave Mac Morgan a quick look.

“Corporal James,” he said, using his visor microphone. “Your TALOS signal just went yellow. Hold your position.”

The Sergeant had his visor down, and he could read the Corporal’s signal as a green dot, one of ten that corresponded to all the men in his squad. It had just turned yellow. Now he heard the Corporal’s voice in his earpiece, but it seemed fragmented, the signal losing integrity.

“You’re breaking up, Corporal. Reverse your steps and fall back until we get a clear signal. I repeat—fall back. Do you copy, James?”

Nothing came back but a fine wash of static. Then, to the Sergeant’s great surprise, he had only nine green dots on his visor. Nothing was reading for the Corporal at all, and where his amber dot had once been, a steady winking red dot was now displayed, indicating a malfunction. He looked at the others, a puzzled look on his face.

“We’ve lost him,” he said. “He went red.”

“Perhaps he stumbled and fell.”

“No sir, that red light indicates no signal from his TALOS suit at all now. Even if he was unconscious, I should still be able to read his suit, but it’s as if… he just vanished!”

MacRae was all business. “You men there—where’s that bloody tool satchel? On the double!”

Chapter 27

The ladder up was rigged in a matter of minutes, and a man was looking over the opening, well hidden in the shadows of the upper rock. It was seen that on one side of the rock, several scratches and scuff marks indicated someone else had tried to climb to the spot, perhaps with success, if Elena's story bore credence.

"About that Grandfather's tale," said Elena to Mac. "It doesn't seem like there was any movement in time."

"Aye," said Mac. "The fellow turns up days later when he's delivered to that prison ship."

"There was one odd thing, assuming the whole story isn't bunk. What do you make of what he said about the pillars of fire?"

"Miss Fairchild… I think we can safely say that story was a load of rubbish, probably just concocted to bolster the legends concerning this place."

"Oh? Then where's our Corporal James?"

"My bet is that he met with an accident. Maybe his suit failed, and he lost his helmet lamp. We've no idea what's beyond that stone. There may be a fairly treacherous passage back there."

It was soon determined that the very narrow entrance that required the Corporal to slide in on his back could be opened with the setting of a small low-yield explosive charge. The Artisan Engineers had blasted numerous openings and tunnels into the limestone over the years, and it remained very stable, so there was little risk of a collapse. Yet for safety's sake, they rigged out a remote detonator, and retired beyond the prison feature, about a hundred meters from the detonation. It went off without a hitch, and the Argonauts were quick to the scene, looming like automatons in the dust until it finally settled, their helmet headlamps casting long amber cones of light as they worked to clear out the broken stone and rubble.

"We've got that passage opened up enough for any of us to get through," said MacRae. "But I'd recommend we send in a two man recon team first, and they should be tethered to us here with a sturdy rope. The men have rock climbing gear, and both Barret and Cooke have a good deal of experience. I

don’t think the rest should proceed until they give the all clear. Perhaps they’ll find our man James quick enough. He wasn’t very far in.”

But they didn’t find the Corporal, which created yet another mystery to be solved. The way beyond the rock was a narrow throat and gradually opened to a passage allowing a man to stand with little difficulty. Yet it was bounded on every side by solid rock. The stony floor was unbroken or perforated by any pits of crevasses, and the walls, though wrinkled and irregular, offered no apertures or side tunnels of any kind. Above there was just the hint of new Stalactites beginning to form, and in places, the walls seemed wet with thin trails of water that glimmered in the helmet lamps.

As the two men pushed on, the party beyond the rock played out the sturdy nylon rope, keeping just enough tension to have a bit of a tactile connection to the recon team, letting them pull the rope on as they advanced. All the while, Sergeant Keller was keeping a close watch on the condition of both men with his helmet visor, relieved that they remained solid green.

Then one man went yellow and he immediately ordered the team to halt. “Scout team. Stand where you are,” he said quickly. “Reverse five paces.”

He watched, seeing the yellow light, Private Barret, shift from yellow to green. He told the men to look as far ahead as they could for any sign of the Corporal, but nothing was reported. “Very well, hold position there and await further orders.” The Sergeant turned to Morgan. “Sir, this is about the spot where I lost contact with Corporal James. I just saw one of the scouts losing signal integrity, and so I’ve halted the team.”

“How far in have they gone?”

“Looks to be about 50 meters from the rope we’ve played out, and I’m not sure why we can’t maintain a signal hold. These rocks aren’t all that dense and the TALOS suits should be able to broadcast out 500 meters under these conditions. It’s been well tested.”

They soon found that even normal voice communications were starting to show interference, prompting the Sergeant to order the men to fall back another five meters until they recovered signal strength.

“They’ve seen nothing?” asked Elena.

“Not yet,” said the Sergeant. “But Barret reports the passage makes a bend to the right and seems to descend ahead of their present position. That could be the spot where we lost the Corporal. Shall I have him edge forward? The second man can keep a firm hold on him with the rope.”

“Very well. Proceed.”

The Sergeant ordered Barret to narrate every step he took, so he could hear him as long as possible. As he advanced, there was rising static on the voice line, until his voice was lost in the wash.

“Hold fast to that tether,” the Sergeant cautioned his other man. Cooke was still in signal range, and Keller could hear his breathing over the open connection. His condition dot was safely green, but the yellow dot for Barret had him worried. Then it happened.

Cooke had his helmet lamp focused ahead on his mate, the rope between the two men kept taut as Barret advanced. He saw the other man reach the bend in the passage ahead, and then disappear around the corner. Seconds later, the rope when completely limp and fell slack to the stony floor of the passage. Quite surprised, he called out to Barret, for the man could not have been more than fifteen meters ahead of him. All he heard was the echo of his own voice. He tried calling on his helmet radio, but there was nothing but static.

“Damn,” he swore, reporting the incident to the Sergeant, who already suspected the worst. The yellow dot for Barret had gone red… Cooke was ordered to pull on the rope, thinking the other man may have fallen, meeting some unseen stumbling block that may have taken down Corporal James as well. That might account for the rope going suddenly slack like that. Barret could be on the floor of the passage now, but it was not so.

As Private Cooke pulled slowly on the rope, it offered no resistance at all, yet it had been firmly clipped to the other man’s waist belt on the TALOS suit, and with a very sturdy clasp. As he gathered the rope in, he soon came to its end, seeing there was now no clasp at all. The end of the rope seemed singed and burnt, fused as if cut clean through by a laser, or perhaps an acetylene torch. There was no knife work involved. The charred end was ample evidence that it had been severed by some kind of heat. He activated his radio and reported what had happened.

“We’ve lost Barret,” said the Sergeant. “Cooke says the rope went slack, and it’s been burned clean through.”

“Burned?”

“He says the end is seared—still warm in his hand.”

“Can’t say I like the sound of that,” said MacRae rubbing the stubble on his chin. He eyed Miss Fairchild, seeing the worry in her eyes.

“Well, what’s happened to them?” she asked. “We should have rigged out a video on the second man.”

“Wouldn’t have helped,” said Morgan, coming over after huddling with Sergeant Keller. “There’s a blind turn, about fifteen meters ahead of the second man. Private Barret vanished after he made that turn, so the other man would have to be right on his heels to see anything, and we might have lost the two of them in that instance. Cooke has called out for him, and Barret should hear him easily enough, but nothing comes back, and the TALOS suit reads no signal at all, just like the Corporal.”

“Alright,” said Elena. “I think it’s fair to say we’ve found the source of our magnetic anomaly. If the information we have about the time rifts is accurate, then I think we may have found one right here.”

“Unsecured?” said MacRae. “I thought these rifts were to be under lock and key. That’s what all this bloody business with the keys is about, right?”

“So we believed. Who knows, these passages and caves twist off in all directions down here. We may have just uncovered an approach to this rift that the key makers never found.”

“The key makers? Who are they?” Captain MacRae was getting too many questions and not enough answers.

“Somebody had to engineer these keys and place them in the artifacts where they’ve been found. Someone had to put that key into the Selene Horse.”

“Aye,” said MacRae, “and when did he do that? And Why? For this little foray here? If that key was supposed to secure something here, then what’s happened to our men?”

“That’s what we’ve got to find out now,” said Elena, determined.”

“But we don’t even have the key that was supposed to correspond to this place—assuming we’re on the right coordinates that man Dorland reported. We’ll never have that key, Elena. It went down with Rodney.”

“Never say never,” she winked at him. “We won’t find it here—not in this time, but who’s to say we couldn’t find it in some other time.”

“What? Some other time? You act as though we’re at liberty to just shift about as we please. We’re marooned, the way I see things. You believe that box sent us here simply to retrieve the key that was aboard the Rodney. Well, that’s all gone to hell, and what I see here in this little jaunt is just sour grapes. If there is another door here, and built of the stuff like we saw at

Delphi, then we'll never get through it with demolitions. That site looked to be damn near impregnable, save for that key—and where did that one come from?"

"Gordon," she said with an admonishing look, "we can deal with all of that later. Right now I've two missing men to worry about."

"Aye, you're right, but how do you want to proceed?

"Something is odd about these disappearances. It would seem to me that those men might simply backtrack and get to where they were before they vanished."

"At the moment, we have no way of knowing what's around that bend up ahead in the passage, and anyone who gets cheeky enough to have a look goes missing. The path may drop off to a bad fall. It could be anything."

"What we do know is that getting forward seems easy enough, but getting back must be quite difficult. This bit with the rope getting severed like that is eerie. It's as if the man was sent somewhere else, entered some kind of rift like those the American Physics Professor talked about. After all, that's what we think these keys are supposed to secure. One was aligned right along that stairway at Ilanskiy, as Captain Fedorov reported."

"So you figure we've found another here?"

"I can't think of any other explanation, and it's a one way ticket for some reason. Suppose now, in 1943, it's easy enough to get around that bend in the passage. The man walks right in to a rift, and time spirits him away. But that inconvenient tether presents a little problem, so it just gets severed when he shifts. What you say might be correct. There could be a drop off there, or some other hazard. But think of it this way. If our men do shift to some other time, the passage may have changed. These formations have been fairly stable, but something could have happened between now and then that changed things. Suppose they shifted forward, but ten years before the time where they arrive, there was a collapse of this part of the passage. Now, when they look over their shoulder, there is no way back."

MacRae thought about that, then something darker entered his mind. "Suppose they move in time as you suggest," he said. "But there's no clear space for them when they arrive at the other end. Taking your collapse scenario, they could just be shifting forward into rubble and fallen rock. They could be…"

The conclusion the Captain had presented was dark indeed. They could be

dead, killed trying to manifest into solid rock. This rift, if that was what existed here, was unsecured. They had not found any engineered gateway, nor could they have opened it if they did, not having the key.

"So what's our play?" said MacRae. "Do we send in another man? Pardon the metaphor, but won't that be like throwing good money after bad? Do we all just follow suit and try our luck in that passage. If you want my advice, I say we should secure this site, leave a team here on watch incase those men do get back, and get the bloody hell out of here. This place is eerie enough without having men slipping through cracks in time."

"The Macaque," said Elena. "You know how damn clever those things are, and you saw what it had in hand with that candy wrapper."

"You're saying it used this passage here to get to the future somehow?"

"How else would it have that Milky Way bar? When we showed up, it fled this way on purpose. It must have known that this was no dead end. No… I think it knew exactly what it was doing. It went right up that rock to the top where we found that entrance. I think it used this passage before."

"To come and go? Then why can't our men get back here?"

"This might be a one way street," said Elena, thinking. "Those Barbary Apes have been here so long that they must have explored every nook and cranny on the Rock. Nobody pays them any mind. They might have found another way back to this time—another segment of this rift. Look at all these caves and passages down here. Suppose the time rift here is like that, not just one locality, but a network like these caves. This route might go in one direction, and the Apes might get back here by another route."

"And how does that help us now? Our men are still gone—god only knows where."

"All I know is that the Macaque got through—to some place beyond that rock, and our men got somewhere as well. If they have their wits about them, they'll try and follow that monkey."

"Monkey business," said MacRae, shaking his head. "That's what this has all come down to now."

Elena decided. "I'll take your suggestion on how we proceed from here. We'll leave a three man team here under Sergeant Keller, but I'll not risk another man in that passage. Get Private Cooke back. I think we've proved there's a rift here, but we haven't found any gate or door that the key off *Rodney* might open. So we're not in the correct place to transit this rift, and

as we've seen, this is dangerous work."

"No argument there. But I'd pay a high price to get those men back, or to even know where they've gone. What further business do we have here? Is there any way we can get ourselves home?"

"I don't know. In fact, I'm not even sure that our home waters even exist any longer. The only way we'll ever know where this rift goes is to either take that passage behind James and Barret, or to find that damn key that was on the *Rodney*."

"Assuming we ever find what it's supposed to open here."

"Oh, we'll find it Gordon. If it's here, we'll find it."

"I wish I was so confident in that, but giving you the benefit of the doubt, I'll be the first to give the damn thing a good hard knock. We've no key, and we won't get it open, if there is a door here. What's the point?"

Elena gave him a knowing look. Then she said something that opened a whole new set of questions for MacRae. "We'll find that key," she said. "Not here… not now. But we'll find it."

Part X

Stalemate

"To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion."

—Walter Cronkite

Chapter 28

On the Morning of January 12, 1943 O'Connor began his advance on Tripoli. Wimberly's 51st Highland Division led off the ceremonies, the 2nd and 5th Seaforth Battalions advancing up the coast road behind the recon battalion. At this point, the main road turned inland at Homs before branching, with one road bending north again to the coast, and a second heading southeast to Tarhuna. Rather than taking either road, he sent the lead brigade of the 51st up a secondary road that still hugged the coast towards the defensive positions of the Italian Littorio Armored Division.

Much to their own surprise, they caught the Italians napping that morning. The enemy had only probed at the line with light recon elements for the last two weeks, and the appearance of the British recon battalion seemed nothing more to the Italians. When it was suddenly followed by waves of infantry, rushing forward with fixed bayonets, chaos rippled through the outer shell of the defense, and the unprepared tank companies began a hasty retreat.

Some men were still sleeping under their light M14 tanks. Others were just getting up to get morning fires started to shake off the desert cold and begin breakfast. The last thing they expected were the big Scottish infantrymen, raging in with bad intent. Behind them, the brigade artillery had followed the troops and was now starting to send a rain of 25-pounder shells over the leading edge of the infantry attack, concentrating much of that fire on the heights of Hill 151. That low nob was about 10 kilometers inland from the coast, and directly astride the main road which had bent that way again towards the village of Nagazza beyond.

The advance was harried only by German planes, and there were several incidents where the columns were strafed as they pressed forward. O'Connor's problem was that the German operation in Syria and Iraq had siphoned off a good part of the Western Desert Air Force. Four wings, two other fighter groups, and a bomber wing were all assigned to operations in that sector, leaving him with only two dedicated fighter wings and two bomber wings, one the American 12th Bombardment Group on loan to the RAF. While those bombers could fly from fields around Benghazi, his air superiority assets had far too few fields close enough to allow for quick

turnaround.

There was only the one good strip at Misrata, another at Bene Walid, and two more near Sirte, all well behind the front. It became necessary to establish two highway strip sites along the main coast road, one at Zliten, and the forward strip at Homs, but these could service only one squadron each of no more than 12 to 16 planes. So the early going saw Rommel enjoying something he had not had for a very long time—a slight advantage in the fighter duels contesting the airspace over the battlefield. His own fields were very close, west of Tarhuna, and numerous fields near Tripoli.

Recon reports from the Luftwaffe were flooding in, and he could see what O'Connor was up to, a fast armored force probing south of Tarhuna, and a big push forming up on the coast. Initial reports from the Littorio Division were just frantic enough to prompt him to get on the telephone to General Randow with the 15th Panzer Division.

"You had better get a regiment of Panzergrenadiers behind Negazza," he said. "Our Italian friends seem to be a bit shaky."

"I have the 104th in position to move immediately," said Randow, "and my motorcycle recon battalion has already reached that village."

"Good, but keep the rest of your division around Castelverde. Things may get interesting soon."

Rommel was looking at the big gap between that southern force probing towards Tarhuna, and the push near the coast. The ground just south and east of Tarhuna was very open, well suited to mobile operations, and he had Bismarck's 21st Panzer Division sitting in road column like an arrow aimed right at that void in the enemy position.

Funck's 7th Panzer is at Tarhuna as I wanted, he thought. What if I did fire that arrow? I would have two good panzer divisions right in that gap. If I order the 90th Light up to grapple with this southern force, then I might turn those two divisions northwest for the coast.

His instinct was to attack, not to simply sit in the favorable position he had occupied. He wanted to fight his enemy with sword and shield, and it was very like him to consider committing his reserve 21st Panzer Division to a bold attack like this, right at the outset. How might O'Connor operate to counter that?

The report he got next enlightened him a bit. 1/7th Recon of Funck's division had been well to the south of Tarhuna in that gap. When he saw the

skies heating up with aerial duels, an enterprising Lieutenant Huber decided to get to the highest ground he could find, which was hill 402, about 12 kilometers south of Tarhuna. From that position he could clearly see a second division advancing up the road, and it looked like infantry.

So that southern group of enemy forces is stronger than I thought, Rommel mused, his eyes playing over the map in his field tent. That will most likely be their 7th Armored Division on their extreme left, and they are supporting it with an infantry division.

Now he resisted the urge to do two things he might have done at once in the older days. His reflex was to shoot that arrow immediately, and instead he decided to wait. The second was to forego the urge to leap onto a Storch and get up for a look at the battlefield himself. There were still too many fighter duels underway, and prudence argued against any aerial sortie at that moment. The old Rommel might have thrown caution to the wind, but this man was now chastened and wizened by much experience.

This was all an aftereffect of the mellowing of his temperament during the last year when he had been forced onto the defensive so many times, his offensive plans checked by that damnable heavy British armor. He wanted to ascertain where it was, or whether it was even present, and he did not think his enemy would hold that card for long if this was the big push he thought it was. So Rommel waited for his opponent to make his next move, cautiously eyeing the Knight and Bishop O'Connor was already developing on his flank. He was content to move a single pawn with that order to General Randow, a measure of restraint that he seldom showed in the past. His other pieces would remain in his camp, behind the serried row of his pawns, the 164th Light, which held the high ground between the coast and Tarhuna.

Perhaps my many setbacks here have sobered me, he thought to himself, thinking he might be losing his edge. We shall see.

* * *

O'Connor decided to go all out that first day and continue pressing the attack by 51st Highland into the late afternoon, determined to keep the fighting going into the evening if necessary. He wanted to get through that gap on the coast where the high ground began to rise slowly towards Tarhuna to the southwest.

He had been behind the lines at the old ruin site of Sidi Surur, but he could not hear the battle there, so he wanted to get forward. He had Brigadier Todd's 1st Tank Brigade with him as his Army reserve, and he rode with them all that morning into the afternoon, moving forward to the heights of Ras Ahmed, about mid-way on the road from Homs to Tarhuna. There he met with General Briggs of the 1st Armored Division, which was moving astride that road as he had planned.

"Just got our first look at the Germans," said Briggs. "The armored car battalion pushed down the road from Ras Ahmed, and there's a Jerry MG unit here, at Gasar Da'uun about eight klicks on. Shall I push them out?"

"Please do," said O'Connor. "I'll want this hill beyond that town as well, number 422. I've got 23rd Armored Brigade off to your northeast up the road to Homs. So I think I can safely send your division on to Tarhuna now. Southforce is flanking that position to the west. I haven't heard anything from Horrocks down there yet, but no news is good news."

"What about the coast road?" asked Briggs.

"Wimberly's got Hill 151 overlooking the Wadi. That's where the Italians have holed up. He's making another push in the morning, and I'll have two brigades from the 44th Home Counties Division up behind him by noon. Rommel's a sly one today. He's letting the Italians hold that coast road, but you know damn well that he'll have a good reserve behind them. Yet he hasn't shown me his panzers yet. He's just sitting up on that high ground to either side of Tarhuna, like Wellington at Waterloo."

Briggs didn't like the sound of that, for he knew they were already up against veteran German troops, very well led. Giving them the benefit of good terrain on defense was one more straw in their favor.

"Don't worry," said O'Connor. "23rd Armored is ready to move, and that's my hammer that will break the Italians, just you wait."

By dawn Briggs had chased the German MG battalion out of Gasar Da'uun, and he had scouts up on Hill 422. That gave him an eyeful, and now he could report that there were enemy tanks due west on the road, battalion strength.

"They look to be screening Tarhuna at this point," he said on the radio. "Do you want me to ruffle their feathers?"

"Make it so. I'll have a brigade of the Northumbrian Division come up to support you from the south."

Like an encroaching tide rising relentlessly towards that imposing high ground, the 8th Army was slowly making contact with the defense Rommel had put in place. The gap that Rommel had seen the previous day was now filling with elements of Briggs' division, and that of Nichols with the Northumbrians. This was going to join Horrocks' Southforce with Briggs in the center, and a discernable front was now forming on the battlefield.

O'Connor would soon learn that 7th Armored had found a German airfield that had been set up well south of the road through Tarhuna, and they were already after it with their leading tank battalions.

That was the field at Suq al Jum'ah, and it was the southernmost anchor of Rommel's infantry positions, defended by Obersturmfuhrer Ramcke and a kampfgruppe of his tough parachute units. This was the one airmobile force that had not yet received orders to withdraw to a friendly port for shipment to Toulon. Those orders had been issued, but when Rommel saw them, he simply tore them up and put them to the fire. He would later claim he never received them if OKW got after him about it. In the meantime, he had a veteran parachute regiment at his disposal until OKW could sort the matter out.

KG Ramcke was holding the rightmost flank of his line, from the airfield south, screening the height of Hill 542, and the stony pass at Ras Al Abar beyond it. If Horrocks could get through that, he would have effectively turned Rommel's line. From there the ground descended towards the plain of Tripoli, a heavily cultivated region that approached the great city from the south. The paras were in good positions, and they held their ground, the British tanks stopping to pour on fire. Soon the Germans got support from a battalion of artillery from the 90th Light Division, and then the recon battalion and Panzerabwehr Battalion 605 came up to put in a counterattack.

General Marcks of the 90th Light had his headquarters right there at Ras Al Abar, and he was committing his division reserve to try and hold that line. From there, his men were dug in all the way to the Tarhuna road, where the 50th Northumbrian Division was only now deploying two more brigades. Behind them, on that road, was Bismarck's 21st Panzer Division, poised like a steel arrow in a crossbow. Rommel had pulled back the bolt, was taking aim, and now he decided to fire.

Before he did anything, he sent a message to General Randow, telling him to bring any uncommitted unit of his 15th Panzer Division to Tarhuna

immediately. There were several highland roads he could take, one through Sidi Salem, and another through Ras er Rumia about eight kilometers further east. Then he fired his crossbow and sent von Bismarck into action. He had identified the location of most every major formation in the 8th Army. Now Rommel wanted to mass the fire and steel of all three panzer divisions against one sector of the advancing enemy force, and attempt to achieve a decisive advantage there. Funck was already holding Tarhuna, now the other two divisions would join to create a strong mailed fist.

It was the same plan he had the impulse to put in play earlier, only now his patience had paid him good dividends. There would be no surprises. He knew where his enemy was. Now it was time for the primary principles of mechanized warfare to come into play—speed, concentration of force, and all out shock in the attack. He put in a call to the Luftwaffe, asking for any *Stuka* support that might be available. Then he telephoned General Funck and ordered him to attack south with any force he deemed sufficient to engage the Northumbrian Division.

General John Sebastian Nichols had served ably in the first war, where he came to be called “Crasher” by his fellow officers for his headstrong application of force whenever he attacked. He was already one of the heroes of this war, having fought in Syria and Iraq with “Habforce” in the race to relieve the beleaguered British airfield at Habbaniyah. After that he had moved to the 151st Brigade of the 50th Division when it arrived in the Middle East. Now he had been bumped up to division command.

Crasher Nichols was about to have a very bad day. His division had come up in column, deploying its three brigades, but a series of escarpments had served as a breakwater as he advanced. He ended up with one brigade north and east of that terrain, and the other two in hand to the south and west. The lone brigade, the 150th, had already run right into Funck’s Panzergrenadiers dug in south of Tarhuna, and now the Germans were counterattacking there. I/25th Panzer Battalion went right around them, pushing between the 150th and that high escarpment, and overrunning the 74th Royal Artillery that was just getting set up.

Now, as the crossbow fired, the 1st Battalion of von Bismarck’s 5th Panzer Regiment came bolting up the road, saw the breakthrough already underway, and followed it. As if instinctively knowing how to best support one another, Funck and von Bismarck had masterfully chosen the one spot in

the advancing enemy line that was most vulnerable. Unable to contain himself any longer, Rommel leapt to a staff car and ordered the driver to get him forward up that road, pressing hard through the dust of 21st Panzer Division.

Rommel was on the attack.

On the road from Homs to Tarhuna, General Briggs was set to advance on that screen of tanks when, to his surprise, they surged forward to attack him. Cool in battle, Briggs regrouped his lighter armored cars and pulled them back, sending up two battalions of tanks, the Bays and 10th Hussars, both equipped with the new M4 Medium tank from the Americans. He had his 1st Armored Division deployed in a horseshoe formation, and the action was right at the bend. It looked to be a situation he could easily control, but what the General did not realize was that the German tank battalion was nothing more than a spoiling attack.

While Briggs was setting up his artillery, screening his left with light MG troops, setting out his AT guns, mustering his armored cars, that German tank battalion had been sent only to thumb his nose and to get him to do exactly that. The German attack there was a delaying force, a holding force, meant only to gain the attention of Briggs and his division, for the real attack was much farther west, and due south of Tarhuna.

Confusion is one of the worst enemies on any battlefield. In spite of frenetic radio communications all over the airwaves, no one really knew exactly what was happening in all that smoke and dust; who was holding, who was really seizing the day. Officers stood on the highest ground they could find, eyes puckered in the cups of their field glasses, trying to see what was happening, assess its importance, and determine what to do.

General Nichols could hear the distress from his 150th Brigade, which had met an unhappy fate when it was overrun and captured at Gazala in the old history. Now it seemed that Fate was tapping its shoulder yet again, with Panzergrenadiers to its front, and enemy tanks breaking through and sweeping past its left flank. Those tanks and the high escarpment were now between that brigade and the remainder of its division. In effect, it was being cut off, and was now struggling to extricate itself from the enemy attack, falling back on Hill 402.

Nichols got on the radio himself, ringing up his commanding officer, General Horrocks. “I’ve a bit of a situation on my hands. 150 Brigade is cut

off on my right, and Jerry is throwing the kitchen sink at me. I'll have to pull my other two brigades back, and that's going to expose your right flank."

An armored cavalryman through and through, Horrocks knew that his attack against KG Ramcke for that airfield had to be suspended immediately. "Alright," he shouted, one eye on the map, his hand holding the earpiece to his head. "I'll throw a right cross your way, and swing round Point 7."

That was the small ruined outpost site of G'sar Teniza, right at the southernmost tip of those hilly escarpments that were bisecting Nichol's division. Horrocks reasoned that the Germans had found a weak point in the line and they were 'pulling a Rommel' on Nichols, so he was going to move like quicksilver with his 7th Armored Division, boldly to his right and rear. He had it in mind to swing right below those escarpments, and possibly catch the enemy breakthrough on the flank.

That airfield could wait.

Chapter 29

Speed, concentration and shock—those were the hallmarks of the deadly art of blitzkrieg that the Germans had set loose upon the world in 1940. It was a craft that Rommel had mastered long ago, but one he had been forced to forsake in the face of an invincible foe that had forced him to adopt WWI style tactics, relying on terrain, wire, mines, artillery. He had been fearful of even committing his precious panzers to any offensive operation, and even now, after the decisive check he forced upon the British near Mersa Brega, the shadow of his earlier defeats at Bir el Khamsa, Tobruk, and the Gazala Line still darkened his way. Yet at heart, he was a gambler, willing to risk all for the sake of grasping the one moment in a battle that could turn it from a grueling battle of attrition, to one of maneuver, dash and bravado, dramatic advances that were sure to draw the Führer's eye. For that he needed his old high art of the blitzkrieg—speed, concentration and shock.

Funck's 7th had jabbed the cumbersome British 1st Armored Division on the nose as it came up the road from Homs to Tarhuna. Rommel's crossbow had fired, and now the whole of von Bismarck's 21st Panzer was through a narrow three kilometer gap in the line and breaking out into the open ground beyond. 15th Panzer had been moving all night along the narrow mountain roads through the high country, snaking their way inexorably south. They would emerge east of Tarhuna, some twelve kilometers from the town, and they would swing right around the horseshoe formation Briggs had pointed their way, using the speed of their faster Leopards and Lions relative to the Valentines, Cromwells, and American M4s.

The ill-fated 150th Brigade would now find itself surrounded on all sides in the swirling chaos of that dark desert night. The battalions were still trying to withdraw to the rear, but ran right into Rommel's 501st Heavy Tiger Battalion. They were cut off, confused as to what was happening, lost in the silt and shadow of that terrible night.

Yet Horrocks' instincts before dusk had set him on the right course. He knew approximately where the 150th Brigade had been advancing, and therefore knew the location of the enemy breakthrough. Now he was moving with all the speed he could muster, pulling 7th Armored Division out of its

attack on that airfield, and racing for the pass behind him that would lead to the flank of the presumed enemy thrust. It extended from the ruin of Gsar Teniza below that escarpment, through a low depression to the solitary spike of Hill 357, called Tummet by the locals.

The Germans had seen the gap, looking ahead in this mad game of chess, and there they had posted their AT battalion and the Pioneers of 21st Panzer Division as a blocking force. Brigadier Roddick's 4th Light Armored Brigade was leading, with mostly M5 light tanks, a few medium Grants, and several dozen armored cars. They pushed up to the ruins, sent in infantry to occupy them, and then called for artillery to range in on the German AT guns.

Roberts 22nd Armored Brigade was on their right, closer to Tummet. They had the medium Grants, with a few Crusader IIIs, but found no enemy had as yet reached that hill. The map indicated a road up ahead to the east, and Roberts had little doubt that the Germans were using it that night. It would be two more long hours, with both sides feeling their way forward in the darkness towards the barest hint of a soft red glow on the far horizon.

As dawn broke on the 14th of January, the Lions were raging east towards that rising sun. The entire 150th Infantry Brigade had been overrun and bypassed by the concentrated sweep of Rommel's mobile forces. The 15th Panzer was around Briggs' horseshoe formation and already flanking the 1st Armored Division. Horrocks and General John Harding had moved the 7th Armored smartly, and by now it was engaged with defensive units the Germans had assigned to cover the pass between the ruins and Tummet. Further east, Funck's Lions at dawn were on the prowl.

The question now was where they might be going? It was 40 kilometers to the coast road, across open desert broken occasionally by studded hills, long abandoned shrine sites, the occasional bir, and a network of wrinkled wadis. It was here, at his moment of triumphant breakthrough, that the Desert Fox had to be very wily.

Rommel had been up on Hill 410, about 10 klicks west of Tarhuna. From that height he could see the wide swath of dust that marked the progress of his bold enveloping maneuver, and clearly make out the vast horseshoe of the British 1st Armored. He was receiving reports from his leading units and learned that 15th Panzer had a battalion of tanks, its recon element, and the pioneer battalion well past the lowermost end of that horseshoe. It was time to change their direction and turn them north towards the road to Homs.

Well south of that sector, three companies of the 1st Battalion 25th Panzer Regiment in Funck's division were free to follow the road south and east if they wished. It would dog the long winding course of a deep wadi for over 35 kilometers, and then lead to a broken region of rugged hills, more wadis, and ragged escarpments. Even there it would be another 40 kilometers to the coast, and by the time those panzers got there, they would be out of fuel and over 100 kilometers from any supporting supply units.

No, thought Rommel. The action at Mersa Brega taught me that this British Army is simply too large to try and bag it like that. If I order such a move, O'Connor will do exactly what he did in that battle. He'll stubbornly hold his ground, and dare me to try and get to the coast. And he undoubtedly has one or even two more infantry divisions back there in reserve. We've seen nothing of the Indian division, or the South Africans. So what I must do now is fight these armored divisions and wreck them. We don't want the coast road. We want to hurt them again, just as we did at Mersa Brega. It's time to fight. I've got the two British Armored divisions isolated from one another. Perhaps I can destroy both!

He got on the radio and sent out another coded order for the 90th Light to advance on the remaining two brigades of the Northumbrian division. KG Ramcke was ordered to go with them, and he had the special units of Sonderverband 288 on his extreme southern flank to move into action as well.

As the morning wore on to mid-day, the situation changed. O'Connor did have a reserve division at hand, the 4th Indian, and it had been motoring up from a point well south of Misrata on an inland track that ran parallel to the coast road, finally reaching the front. Randow's 15th Panzer was turning Brooks' flank from the south, when the Central Indian Horse came up on a company of his 8th Panzer Regiment. The full division was not far behind it, advancing on two roads in column of march.

It was too late to stop the turning attack, which had already surged north to find the artillery park and headquarters of Brooks' division. It was a wild hour, with the Brigade HQ of Fischer's 22nd Armored dug in on Hill 422, and the division headquarters itself under direct attack. Four battalions of artillery were in that area, and some had to depress their barrels to engage the German tanks at near point blank range. The road to Homs and the coast was cut when a company of Lions stormed into the hamlet of Gasar Da'uun, but

O’Connor was only 7 kilometers from the action up on the higher promontory of Hill 455. There he had a very good view of the battle, and he could also see that his reserve division was about to make a most timely arrival.

Randow was going to smash the southern arm of the horseshoe position, but soon find his own flank seriously compromised by the arrival of the 4th Indian Division. It was this sort of rollicking chaos that was now taking hold, as units emerged from the smoke and dust of the battle, blundered into other units, some friendly, some enemy.

Meanwhile, the action on the coast road took a turn for the worse for the Italians when the combined weight of 51st Highland, the two brigades of 44th Home County, and the heavy tanks of 23rd Armored Brigade finally broke the their defense. Littorio was shattered, its battalions falling back and struggling to regroup. The town of Negazza was overrun, and even the two battalions of Randow’s Panzergrenadiers were forced to withdraw. The British were now through the narrow defile and advancing onto the widening coastal plain on the road to Castelverde.

When Rommel got the news, he swore… The Italians again. Yet, like a good chess player, he had kept a piece or two in reserve himself. The Trento Motorized Division was east of Tripoli where it had been improving defenses and digging an anti-tank ditch. He immediately gave it orders to advance along the coast road through Castelverde to reinforce that flank. He would not see all that he had won with his panzer divisions lost in an hour by the Italians, but he had no German troops available to answer the crisis. The Trento Division had proved reliable in the past, and he hoped they could at least put a cork in the bottle and buy him some time.

* * *

Reports were coming in faster than O’Connor could read them, but he was most eager to learn what was happening far to the south with Horrocks. There, the turning attack had run into the bulk of 21st Panzer and was getting nowhere, and now O’Connor gave the order for Southforce to plan a withdrawal.

“Our tanks are damn near empty,” said Horrocks on the radio. “I’ve got some fuel trucks up, but it will take me several hours to get things moving

again."

"What happened to the Northumbrians?"

"I've two of his brigades in hand, along with my own motorized infantry brigade. Jerry has brought up the 90th Light against them, but we're holding. Stores for the artillery are running low, and the men need water."

"Well get them out of there. It was my fault, Joe. I simply deployed you too far south and Rommel ran right into the gap between you and Briggs. You had the good sense to move east as you did, but the Germans just got there first. We've got the 4th Indian Division up now, and if you can move south and east, you should make contact with them tomorrow. After that, we'll see where things stand and try to sort it all out. We couldn't win through, but they aren't pushing me back to Mersa Brega either. No, I'll stand my ground and force Rommel to accept a stalemate here."

Horrocks thought that the inverse might be true, but he said nothing more. The arrival of the 4th Indian had, indeed, closed off any possibility that Rommel could turn for the coast, and with that any chance for a real dramatic victory. As before at Mersa Brega, the two armies could clash and hurt one another, but neither was really strong enough to decisively beat the other.

On the 15th, Rommel shifted Randow's division north to reinforce his attack on Briggs' 1st Armored, and had good results. That was the last day of hard fighting, as both sides were running low on fuel, ammo, and other supplies. A three day fight was about all either Army could carry forward, though when Monty had made this advance in the real history, he had dumped ten days supplies in his forward depot, and even then, could proceed with only half his army at any one time. He prevailed because in that telling of events, Rommel's morale was at its lowest ebb of the war. Had Kinlan and his brigade been there, they might have made all the difference, but now it was an even playing field for both sides, and the Germans actually had the edge where armor was concerned—not in numbers but certainly in the quality of their tank designs.

O'Connor had ten days supply in hand at the outset of the battle, but he had thrown far more divisions at the enemy than Monty did, and so it was all burned up much faster. 7th Armored found the fuel and water trucks it had been waiting for nowhere in sight. Harding's inability to move left him in a precarious position, and he found he had to rely on the three brigades of infantry to hold out in a stubborn cauldron and await further developments.

4th Indian Division eventually came up and it was occupying the ground between the two British armored divisions. General Briggs finally realized how badly beat up his division was, and began to try and extricate himself and fall back along the road to Homs. His situation was so bad, that O'Connor was forced to withdraw 23rd Armored from the coastal attack and begin moving it towards Briggs. Aside from that sector on the coast against the two Italian Armored divisions, the British had been decisively checked everywhere else on the field. Now the removal of that armor, and the arrival of the Trento Division on the other side, would see that advance halted as well.

Stalemate….

Rommel was more than satisfied with his achievement. He had held the Tarhuna position, largely destroyed the 150th Infantry Brigade of the Northumbrian Division, stopped both British Armored divisions, hurting each one in the process, and also managed to stabilize the coastal sector. It was a victory as far as he could see things, though not the decisive battle he might have hoped for in earlier years. The memory of Bir el Khamsa still haunted him, but he noted that in all these actions, there had been no sign of that unbeatable British heavy armor.

Perhaps the rumors are true, he thought. It was said that unit was at Tobruk when all those ammunition and fuel ships exploded. Perhaps it was badly damaged in that mishap. In any case, it was not here, and in fact, there's been no sign of those monsters for some time. By now the one I sent to Tripoli for shipment to Toulon should have arrived. I wonder what our tank engineers will think of it when they get a look at it?

For now, I've stopped O'Connor here again, just as I did at Mersa Brega. He claimed a victory there because I gave up the Buerat line. I don't think he can claim one here. This position at Tarhuna is very strong. In fact, given this little victory here, I think I could hold it indefinitely. The Italians will be pleased, particularly Bastico and Cavallero. They undoubtedly promised Mussolini they would save Tripoli, and they were quite a nuisance when I decided to move here from the Buerat line. Well, I've save Tripoli for them. O'Connor will be a month or more trying to recover from this. If I had the troops Hitler pulled out for his campaigns elsewhere, I'd finish this O'Connor off once and for all. As it stands, I've enough force in hand to stop him, but cannot really push him back unless he chooses to go.

That’s the way it will be here for a time, two desert rams butting heads, and neither one gaining any real advantage. As always, it will come down to logistics again in a situation like this. I’ve got good lines of communication to Tripoli, but one day, the Allies will realize that they have a navy in the Med, and they’ll move to try and interdict our sea lanes in a more forceful manner! That leaves me with a most uncomfortable feeling.

We held a local advantage in the air here, but only because so much of the Western Desert Air Force is in Syria and Lebanon. I wonder how that little campaign is proceeding?

Ah well, time to rest. First I will make my report to Kesselring so he can throw Hitler a bone and say we stopped O’Connor cold. Then I owe my Lucie a letter with a little more hope in it than those I was sending her earlier. When I retreated from Gazala to Mersa Brega, I had the feeling all was lost here in North Africa.

Things have changed.

Chapter 30

Rommel was soon surprised to learn that Kesselring wanted him to file that report in person, and so he flew to Tunis on the morning of January 15 to meet with von Arnim. He offered a handshake to his opposite number in 5th Panzer Army, but found it cold, easily seeing the resentment in von Arnim's eyes.

This Silesian Peacock looks down on me, thought Rommel. I've been fighting here for two years, and now he thinks he will trump me simply because they have called his Korps a Panzer Army. Yes, von Arnim has always been an insider, graduating from the most prestigious schools, currying favor with the old guard, and looking down on anyone else he deems unworthy. I'm sure he took great satisfaction with my setbacks last year, and I suppose he thinks he can do better here. Yet he never had the Führer's ear like I had, and frankly, he hasn't swallowed an ounce of victory here. I have fought time and again, and often won, even against daunting odds.

"Gentlemen," said Kesselring, his discerning eye perceiving the frosty relationship between the two men. He would have to play the arbiter and referee here, and expected a tense and heated discussion. "I asked you here, Herr General, so that we can reach a mutual understanding on how we plan to conduct operations. As you know, the Americans have made some surprising moves of late, racing all the way to the Tunisian border. That was most unexpected, and it found us ill-prepared to adequately respond. Meanwhile, your hard fought victory on the Tarhuna line may have bought us an interval of calm on that front. Now we must decide how to address what will soon become the battle for Tunisia."

At least he has the decency to give credit when due and use the word victory, thought Rommel. "What are you proposing?" he said, knowing that Kesselring would have already determined what he wanted here.

"To be forthright," said Kesselring, "I believe we must first redress what I consider an imbalance in the present force allocations. At Tarhuna, you hold a front of no more than fifty miles with three Panzer divisions, two German infantry divisions, and at least three decent Italian divisions."

“Not to mention Ramcke’s Parachute Regiment,” said von Arnim. “That is a unit that was ordered to report to Tunis over two weeks ago.”

“What?” Rommel played the fool. “I received no such order.”

“Nonsense,” said von Arnim. “Or have you been so busy seeing to your collection of medals that you over look dispatches from OKW these days, and think you can just get away with it?”

“I have overlooked nothing,” said Rommel. “I tell you no such order ever came to me. If it was sent, then it was lost in transit.” He stuck to the lie, for he knew it could never be flanked.

“Never mind that,” Kesselring intervened. “Whether you received it or not, the order stands, and it comes directly from the Führer. So that unit must move immediately to Sfax. I will arrange shipping to get it up to Tunis, and from there it goes to Toulon, along with all the rest of Student’s Korps.”

“What is going on?” asked Rommel.

“We don’t know precisely, but Goring has been very busy of late collecting JU-52s in Greece.”

Rommel proffered a wan smile. “Crete,” he said flatly. “Someone has some unfinished business to attend to there. Well, it may be too late for that. Those troops could have made a world of difference here. If Goring throws them at Crete, what will they do but sit there, assuming they can even take the place.”

“That is not for us to decide,” said Kesselring. “And while we are on the topic of unit transfers, let me continue. While you hold a fifty mile front with eight divisions, von Arnim has little more than half that many to hold a line that extends from Bone on the northern coast all the way south to Gafsa and beyond—over 200 miles. We must redress that imbalance immediately. I will want, at the very least, one panzer division sent to southern Tunisia immediately. Then I would also prefer a German infantry division, either one will do, but if you cannot part with them, then you must send me two more Italian divisions.”

“What? You want 30% of my Army?”

“Your math is correct,” said von Arnim. “Frankly, as I see things, the eight division force should be here in Tunisia, and not in Tripolitania. Then you can try holding your fifty miles with four divisions, and see how you fare. I’m up against eleven Allied divisions here, and I believe you are contending with no more than seven or eight divisions in the British 8th

Army. It's a miracle I have been able to keep Eisenhower from rolling right in to Tunis, and if he does that, this whole affair is over—for the both of us."

Rommel's eyes narrowed. He had expected this. They were going to continue to pick apart his Panzer Army Afrika, which was really not anything more than a good strong Korps by any standard he knew. Yet the imbalance Kesselring was pointing out was plain enough to see. In fact, he had considered a daring new plan himself, and now he decided to propose it."

"Suppose I sent you three good German divisions instead of two," he said calmly, much to the surprise of both the other men. "And suppose this Field Marshall comes along with the bargain." He looked at von Arnim now, knowing the mention of his leg up in rank would rankle him.

Kesselring smiled. "What do you suggest?"

Now Rommel leaned over the map table. "As you have seen," he began, "the position at Tarhuna is very strong, but I can count no more than five or six supply ships that have made it down to Tripoli in the last two weeks. Goring has most of the Luftwaffe up north in Tunisia and Sicily, which is why I was quite surprised that the few fighter squadrons I had in hand did so well. This big operation into Syria and Iraq again was the reason for that. It caught the Allies off guard, and they have used their Western Desert Air Force to redress the initial imbalance on the ground in Syria. But that will not be the case for long. Bombers are already revisiting Tripoli daily, which is why I get most all of my supplies by Siebel Ferry along the coast now, which has become a long, drawn out affair. So aside from consoling the Italians with the thought that they still have part of a colony in North Africa, why do we need Tripoli?"

"My thinking exactly," said Kesselring. "In fact, I have spoken with both Bastico and Cavallero lately, and sounded out this idea to gauge their initial reaction. Face it, Libya is a lost cause, notwithstanding your gallant efforts there, Herr Field Marshall. Logistically, the distances were simply too imposing to keep your army adequately supported. It's a miracle that you prevailed as long as you did, particularly against that new heavy armor that the British introduced. Strange that we have seen nothing of the kind here, and I hope to god we never do. That said, I suggested Tunisia might be a much better prospect for the Italians, and both Bastico and Cavallero agreed. They said Mussolini has always had his eye on Tunisia, and that he is fed up with the entire situation in Libya. After all, the Italians have taken the real

beating there. They've thrown whole armies on the fire, and seen them burn, for what they were worth. So I think Mussolini would support a general withdrawal from Tripolitania. Is that what you propose?"

"I do," said Rommel enthusiastically. "There is good ground from Ben Gardane through Medinine, Mareth and Gabes. That ground is one of the most defensible positions in all of North Africa, even better than my present position at Tarhuna. I suggest I withdraw there immediately. I can position my Italian Korps at Medinine, backstop it with one good German infantry division and possibly one of my Panzer divisions. That would allow me to then lead a decent Panzer Korps into southern Tunisia to cooperate with you, von Arnim. The Mareth line is our Thermopylae. We can retire there in stages if heavily pushed by O'Connor, making our last stand there opposite Gabes. The badlands west of that port will make it very difficult for them to flank that position. They'll simply have to power through, which will take time. And I can use that time to smash the Americans, allowing von Arnim to concentrate his smaller force on stopping Montgomery."

"Then you propose to operate in Tunisia yourself?"

"I believe I was clear on that," said Rommel.

Von Arnim noted that Rommel gave without yielding anything with this proposal. He would retain command of all the divisions he brought into Tunisia, and nothing would go to strengthen 5th Panzer Army directly. Yet even with that arrangement, his situation would be infinitely better than it was now, where it was only time, supplies, and the winter mud that was preventing Patton from pushing all the way to Sfax. He knew that with Conrath's division added to Fisher's 10th Panzer, he might put in one good counterattack, but Patton still had all of six divisions, outnumbering him three to one in the south.

"What if I joined you in this attack," he said quietly, giving Rommel a cautious look. "I have positioned my mobile units here, near Medkour and Kassem. The Americans have stopped to consolidate their position along the rail line from Constantine to Tebessa. If Patton gets up more fuel and supplies for another move, and if he attempts to make a run for Sfax as we believe, then it was my plan to strike due south towards Ain Beida again to cut him off. We still hold Tebessa, but they are massing troops to take that soon. If you can move quickly, up through the pass at Faid and through Sebeitla, then we can coordinate the offensive together."

“That is agreeable… Assuming we have a clear understanding of who is in command. We cannot be working at cross purposes. We will need to centralize command in one head, and given the fact that I am the ranking officer here, the choice should be obvious.”

That didn’t sit well with von Arnim. “We determined to force you to send me two divisions, and now here you are ready to take over nominal command of the two I already have! This is *not* acceptable to me.”

Kesselring could see that this difference of personalities would not do well on the battlefield. Before von Arnim could voice his objection, he spoke up, hoping to end the battle between these two men here and now so they could fight as one coordinated team.

“It is clear that you rank von Arnim,” he said to Rommel, “but not me. I also hold the Field Marshall’s baton, and Hitler has appointed me *Oberbefehlshaber Süd,* commander of all German forces in the south within this theater. Therefore, if the two of you cannot agree, then I have no recourse other than to assume authority for operational command myself. This will mean that both of you will receive and execute orders directly from me. Understood? We have enough to do while fighting the British and Americans. We cannot fight yet another battle amongst ourselves. Von Arnim?”

“Agreed,” said the General.

“Herr Rommel?”

The Field Marshall took a long breath. He had been running the show for the last two years in Africa, all under the organizational control of the Italians, though he largely did what he pleased. That independence had been curtailed only by Hitler himself, but he also remembered those times when Kesselring had been a strong ally and advocate for him. He would get a great deal of what he wanted if this plan were carried out, and finally be done with Libya once and for all. So he decided to agree.

“Very well,” he said stolidly. “Assuming Hitler approves this arrangement, I will agree.”

“That will be the sticking point,” said Kesselring. “Getting Hitler to approve your withdrawal from Tripolitania may not be easy. In this, I plan to rely heavily on Mussolini himself. I think I’ve convinced him of the merits of settling in at Tunisia as opposed to continuing to fight for Libya. Let us see what we can do.”

Much was different in this telling of events. Here Rommel was not the broken spirit he had been in the old history, his health failing, beset with wracking headaches, sores on his lips and feet, and more jittery than he had ever been. His morale had sunk to an abyss, and retreat seemed his only answer. He had lost the respect of the Italians, who summarily sought to replace him with one of their own Generals.

This time, Rommel had the highly successful holding actions at both Mersa Brega and Tarhuna under his belt. He had not faced the nemesis of the British Heavy Brigade in either battle, save the small force he encountered near Mersa Brega. He had regained a measure of his old warfighting ability, like a boxer fading in the late rounds, laying on the ropes, and then suddenly finding the strength to punch in flurries and keep his opponent at bay.

And this time the Italians were of another mind entirely. They had seen one division after another swallowed in the abyss of Libya, and now Goring's supply system reforms had rendered Tripoli a little used port. Their own navy no longer wanted to risk the much lengthier sea route to Tripoli, all of 600 miles from Naples through the Strait of Messina. Those convoys had been relatively safe under the protection of friendly air cover from Sicily and Malta. It was only the last 100 miles that found them subjected to withering attack by Allied bombers out of Benghazi, and now from rapidly organized air fields around Sirte.

Now most everything went through Tunis, and then by lighter and Siebel Ferry down the coast, or by rail lines south to Sousse and Sfax, and even Gabes. Giving up Tripoli was not without its negative effects. The port and airfields there would surely be put to good use by the Allies, who would now hold two good ports from which they might attack Malta or Sicily. In the end, the decision would rest with Hitler, and several factors would affect that outcome.

First off, there had been no debacle at Stalingrad. In fact, Volgograd was now largely controlled by German troops, though Soviet resistance there continued. Secondly, the massive Operation Uranus and Saturn offensives staged by the Soviets had already played themselves out, and Zhukov had even thrown in another planet with Operation Jupiter and his attempt to retake Kursk. Manstein had been able to stop the Russian offensive, and now Model's 2nd Panzer Armee had been withdrawn from the pocket it had been trapped in for over a month, those units had provided the fodder for new

operations that were now the apple of the Fuhrer's eye.

Hitler marked the progress of the Brandenburg Division down the Euphrates with renewed spirits. His forces in Syria had seized Aleppo, and were now closing in on Homs and Palmyra. The Brandenburgers had swept swiftly through Ar Raqqah and were now closing on Dier Zour. They even had advanced patrols within 30 kilometers of the Iraqi border. The prospect of flanking the British in the Middle East was a dazzling idea in his mind now, and he entertained notions of driving through Baghdad all the way to Basrah. He was also restlessly anticipating the launching of Operation Merkur against Crete, which he fancied as an outer castle wall that would protect the Aegean Sea, and the straits near Istanbul beyond that he now relied on as the life line for Operation Phoenix.

So when Kesselring made his appeal, he couched the whole plan as a strategic rebalancing of forces aimed at dealing the Allies in Algeria a decisive check. He even went so far as to suggest that if Rommel could be permitted to reinforce Tunisia, then he could entertain thoughts of a renewed offensive aimed at driving the Allies out of Algeria altogether. Hitler was largely amenable to the plan, but then Rommel's own victory at Tarhouna became an obstacle. The Führer seized upon it as evidence that Tripolitania could still be defended, and ordered the line at Tarhuna to be held. He even issued orders that the 337th Infantry Division, a unit that had fought in Spain, could now be sent to North Africa to bolster the defense at Tarhuna, leaving Rommel free to reinforce Tunisia as the three Generals there saw fit.

Then he also did something that would affect the balance of power in the west a great deal. When Goring came to him with increasing complaints about the diminishing power of his Luftwaffe forces in the West, Hitler told him that he still had three months before the Spring thaw in Russia, and told him he was therefore free to transfer any aircraft he desired to bolster operations elsewhere. Up until now it had been II Fliegerkorps in North Africa, reinforced by X Fliegerkorps from Greece. Now Goring was free to move anything else.

He chose Luftflotte IV, commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, and cherrypicked the most effective squadrons available, rushing them to the West in a desperate effort to counter the rising power of the Allied Air forces. While this was only supposed to be a short term "loan," those units would never see the skies above Russia again…

Part XI

Lions at Dawn

"The Lions in their dens tremble at his approach"

—Special Tribute:
Order of Ouissam Alaouite
Bestowed by the King of Morocco on
General George S. Patton

Chapter 31

“If and when we find this Russian ship, we must now discuss how to proceed. You tangled with it earlier, Captain Harada. Any advice?”

“Caution,” said Harada. “We had the advantage of surprise in that they did not even know we were in theater—in this time. We counted a lot on that to try and get within missile range, but they must have some very good ears on that ship. They picked up something, possibly the narrow band radio transmissions we were using to contact Admiral Kurita. He was in the van, about fifty klicks ahead of us. That said, we got off all eight SSMs, but they swatted every last one down with their SAMs. Then they started throwing back. We took out a dozen SSMs, but the last was blazing fast, probably a Zircon running at Mach 5. We had to use the laser to get it, and we were damn lucky that succeeded. Otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation, and you’d all be scratching your heads here as to what happened to you, and at a real disadvantage.”

“Yet now we have the F-35’s,” said Fukada, an eager tone in his voice. “What ordnance did you get? Hopefully you’ve got some ship killers in the magazines.”

“We’re carrying the AGM-154-C1,” said Kita.

“The JSOW?” said Fukada, which stood for ‘Joint Standoff Weapon.’ “That’s block three, so it has moving maritime target capability, but it’s damn slow compared to what the Russians will be throwing at us.”

“That’s the nature of the beast,” said the Admiral. “It would be nice if we had the AGM 158, but our American friends only delivered the 154. I guess they need everything else they’ve got for their own CV battlegroups.”

“That limits our strike range to 45 nautical miles on the JSOW.”

“Plus the range of the F-35’s,” Kita corrected. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“You realize we’ve got no GPS here,” said Fukada.

“The missile has infra-red terminal guidance,” said the Admiral, and our pilots will have to put them on the right track when they launch. That’s the best we can do. We’re also carrying smart bombs, and we’ve got the GBU/53B. We can lob those 60 nautical miles out, and that one is optimized

for use in GPS denied environments."

"Tri-seeker capability," said Captain Yoshida off the *Akagi*. "It has Millimeter wave radar detection, infra-red, and semi-active laser. Beyond that, we've got Paveway II and III, but we'd have to get in real tight to use those—eight nautical miles. I say we put our money on the GBU-53. Each plane can carry eight in the internal weapons bay, and the F-35 will have a strike radius of 450 nautical miles with that loadout. So that means we can reach out and touch the enemy at a 500 mile range. That's well beyond anything *Kirov* can throw at us."

"Not quite," said Fukada. "I read up on that new Zircon. It can range out 700 nautical miles—lightning fast. If they see us first, they can hit us before our planes even get close. Face it, the Russians only had one carrier worth the name, so they put all their money into missile tech, and it's damn good. Hence our advice to be cautious here."

"That's the key issue," said Admiral Kita. "We've got to find them before they know we're in the game, just as you tried to do. I want to have planes in the air approaching their weapons release positions before *Kirov* lifts a finger. We've got to put them on the defense. As for our own SSMs, we'd have to be within 75 to 100 nautical miles to let those fly, so I see them as our final option."

We have a good number of helicopters," said Captain Yoshida. "They can serve for long range search. That will allow us to use the F-35's for strike roles. I would assume we would be heading south toward Truk, which was their last known zone of operation."

Harada thought about that, and shook his head. "If we throw up too many helos, they may spot one or more with their Fregat system. Wouldn't that show them our hand? They know we have a single Seahawk, but if they were to spot two or three helos, then what? They'd have to conclude something more is out there. May I suggest a different approach?"

"Go ahead," said The Admiral, listening intently.

"We've fought them before, and even had a verbal joust at the end with this Karpov. He wanted to rub in the fact that we were toothless, and no longer a threat. But he knows we're out here, and he'd much rather send us to the deep six. The only reason he broke off that engagement was to conserve his SSMs. Fukada thinks he's running low, but I'm not so sure. That ship has enormous VLS capacity."

“Then what do you suggest?”

“Let us take the van. We can operate as a forward picket as we head south, and I think I may even get on the radio and see if I can ruffle this guy’s feathers—call him out. After all, when Achilles wanted to take vengeance on Hector, he just rode up to the gates of Troy and called him to battle. I can do that with Karpov.”

“Achilles and Hector have already fought,” said Fukada, but with an edge of warning. “Except we were Hector.”

“Point taken, but I think I could rile this guy up.”

“You mean you’d give away your position?” asked Kita.

“Correct. He’ll think we’re being rushed in to help defend Truk, but I’m betting he won’t target us. He could have done that long ago, but held his fire once he knew we had lost our offensive punch. If I can get this Karpov on the radio, we might be able to get a fix on his position. In fact, I don’t even think he’d care if we had a hard contact on him. Remember, he thinks we can’t hurt him any longer. Oh, we could try sending the Seahawk at him, but he’d just shoot it down easily enough. That’s why he ignored us, and I think he’d ignore us again, unless we got right between him and his intended target.”

“Clever,” said Admiral Kita. “You get out there and thumb your nose at him, see if we can make out his position, then we come over the horizon with bad intent. That’s damn sinister.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” said Harada. “We’ve got to look at this through his eyes. OK, he just hit Truk, but he was damn economical about it. He put a missile on the *Zuiho*, hit the airfield, a tanker, and *Musashi*. Now what does he do to top that? I think he realized that Truk wasn’t the real nerve center of Yamamoto’s operation at the moment—it’s Rabaul. That’s our forward base supporting everything in the Solomons and the campaign in the Fijis. That’s where he’ll find our carriers, and those are the high priority targets he’s after. So I say we set course for Rabaul, and right now. Let me lead you by at least 50 nautical miles. You run silent in EMCON. Keep our F-35’s locked and loaded, and let us flush the quarry out. We’ll make it look like we’re trying to get into a good defensive position to screen Rabaul. We can even solicit Yamamoto’s cooperation. Remember, the whole IJN is down there, and all those ships can work for us.”

Admiral Kita thought for a moment, then smiled. “Captain, let’s get south and find our namesakes. I’ve burned many an incense stick to honor my

ancestors, but never thought I'd get to meet them in the flesh. Getting a look at the real *Kaga* and *Akagi* would be interesting, to say the least."

"Very good, sir. With your permission, I would like to return to my ship and run this by Admiral Yamamoto. We gave them a radio set so we could exchange secure encrypted transmission calls. The question is this—should I reveal your presence here to him?"

"Considering that we'll be joining the fight here, one way or another, I suppose that would be inevitable. Could you arrange a meeting, even if it is via this secure radio protocol? I haven't resolved the issue of chain of command insofar as it concerns this task force, and I'd like to discuss this with him."

The thought of speaking directly with the legendary Admiral Yamamoto was lure enough for Kita. Seeing the man alive was even more, and it would put a face to this impossible scenario in a way the sailors aboard the IJN tanker could not quite do. The decision they had made to intervene in this war would begin by attempting to remove the contagion of *Kirov* from the scene, but it may not end there, and Kita wanted to set the ground rules for future operations.

In all this deliberation, the Japanese had no way of knowing that Karpov himself was now operating with a new agenda, one also aimed at eliminating the contamination of modern influences on this historical milieu. At least that is what Karpov agreed to on the surface in his meeting with Fedorov, Volsky and Gromyko.

* * *

"So we're agreed on a common aim here," said Fedorov. 'The question now is how to proceed?"

"Then we can safely say this mission Kamenski dreamed up is dead?" Karpov did not want to leave any stone unturned. He eyed Gromyko, sizing up the one potential adversary here that he would prefer not to have a disagreement with.

"If we are agreed on this common purpose," said Gromyko, "then I can assume my mission is being collectively undertaken by all of us."

"Then let's be clear," said Karpov. "There will be no hostilities between us, correct?"

“You have my word on that, if you’ll give me the same.”

“Done,” said Karpov. “Frankly, neither one of us could operate here worrying about the other putting a missile into our backsides when we weren’t looking. With your agreement, I will data link with you to make the handshake official. That means we will each see the other’s location at all times. So we can dispense with this theater of sneaking the Admiral ashore here and you lurking in the depths.”

“A submarine Captain is, by his very nature, a cautious man,” said Gromyko. “But I will agree to this.” Gromyko knew he would not be operating close to *Kirov* in any case, and if this truce were to break down, he could terminate the data link at any time.

“Alright then,” said Karpov. “We’re allies, united in a common purpose, and let no one stand to oppose us. First order of business—this rogue destroyer… It’s clearly thrown in with the Japanese, and if I am to cease my intervention here, which is asking a great deal of me, then we must assure ourselves that ship will not be interfering here either. It must be destroyed.”

“We had a good chance at doing that earlier,” said Fedorov, “but we determined it wasn’t worth the missile inventory required. That was because you intended to use those missiles another way, but if we hold to this agreement, then the sole purpose of everything we have under that forward deck is to enforce the understanding we have reached here—that all modern day influences must be purged from this timeline, including ourselves… *Kirov, Kazan,* Captains and crew, including Admirals and heads of state.” He glanced at Karpov with that.

“Yes, yes,” said Karpov. “Let’s begin with this Japanese destroyer. When we last locked horns, it was in the Sea of Okhotsk, and operating with an IJN task force. We warned off the battleships with a missile, then ignored them to go after this *Takami*. I suspected they may have had carriers, which I should have killed, but we never located them. In any case, we must determine how to locate this rogue ship and coordinate our efforts to kill it. Their SAMs are quite effective, but they can’t stop torpedoes with them, can they.” He looked at Gromyko.

“Frankly,” said the Captain. “The weapon I best use to kill a ship is my stealth. It doesn’t matter whether I use a missile or torpedo to do the job. Stealth gives me my firing angle, and I take it. But a good sub Captain never takes a shot unless he thinks it will kill his adversary…. unless ordered to do

so, like that engagement we fought with the Americans off Japan in 2021."

"It was necessary to saturate that carrier with as many missiles as we could put on it," said Karpov. "But let's not refight that old battle. It was already won. Here is my theory on how we can locate this Japanese destroyer. All we have to do is threaten a key asset of the IJN. That was partly my reason for striking Truk as I did, and now I propose that we up the ante and move to strike their forward base at Rabaul, just as you advised earlier, Mister Fedorov."

"But we decided we will no longer intervene here."

"True, but a threat to intervene might flush out our quarry."

"That's a fine line. Even the threat compels the Japanese of this era to take countermeasures they would not have undertaken if we were not here. Don't you see? They would deploy ships to try and defend against such an attack. I'll bet Yamamoto is pulling what little hair he has left out over our presence here."

"Perhaps he ordered that rogue ship to try and ambush us," said Karpov. "All I'm proposing is pushing on them a little to get them to calling their sheep dog. I understand what you are saying, Fedorov, but do you have a better idea as to how we can locate *Takami?* You want me to burn aviation fuel and run the KA-40s all over creation trying to find that ship?"

Karpov hesitated a moment, reaching to his service jacket collar and pressing a hidden button there. Fedorov heard a tinny voice, and he realized Karpov's jacket was wirelessly receiving a signal voice transmission, undoubtedly from Nikolin aboard *Kirov*.

"One moment…" Karpov held up his hand, listening, then spoke aloud, but to Nikolin at the other end of that transmission. "You say it was a direct call—in the clear?... Very well. Stand by, Mister Nikolin. Have the KA-40 vector back into my position here on this island. We'll be returning to the ship directly."

Karpov looked up at the others. "How is it the Americans say it? Bingo! Nikolin just received a voice transmission from the Captain of *Takami*. He wants to have a little chat!" Karpov beamed. "I guess this solves our problem. Who knows what this Captain Harada may want to say to me, but I'll certainly listen, and all the while, I'll put Nikolin—along with your man on *Kazan*, to work triangulating his position. We've got the bastards. I suggest we get back to *Kirov* immediately. Admiral, you are welcome to join us

aboard *Kirov* if you wish—but with the understanding that command of that ship, in every respect, resides with me."

Volsky thought about that, pulled by the desire to see the ship and crew again, to walk those decks, revisit his cabin and stateroom aboard, listen to the ship again at night as he so often did. Yet Karpov's last statement gave him pause. There he would be, standing in the dark shadow of Vladimir Karpov. The memories of how he felt when Karpov arranged his ruse to seize control of the ship at Murmansk were also still bitter in his mind. While he longed to see those old faces again, particularly his dear friend Doctor Zolkin, he had second thoughts. Being there, would bring an obvious palpable tension aboard with him. The crew might become involved with that, and so he thought the better of Karpov's offer, and declined.

"No, Mister Karpov, I think one Admiral is enough on any ship. Two will invariably step on one another's toes. If you don't mind, I will return with Captain Gromyko to *Kazan*.

This scenario was most unexpected. The Japanese had devised a strategy to flush out *Kirov,* thinking Karpov considered them nothing more than a nuisance. Harada's ploy to call out Karpov like Achilles before the walls of Troy was about to backfire on him in a way he could not imagine. He thought Karpov wouldn't waste another shot at his missile defense shield, but now, by directly revealing himself, he was walking towards the lion's den.

Yet not alone…. There were other lions on the prowl, loping their way towards the grey dawn, and Karpov, *Kirov* and all the rest, were going to meet them.

Chapter 32

The conversation between Karpov and Harada was short and cold. The two men had spoken earlier, each one baiting and taunting the other, and this was no different.

“What brings you to my hunting grounds?” said Karpov. “I thought I was clear about what would happen to you if you ever darkened my horizon again.”

“It seems you paid a visit to our naval facilities at Truk recently,” said Harada. “Yet you left without paying the bill. I’m here to collect.”

At that Karpov literally laughed. “Oh? What are you going to do here, Captain, throw chopsticks at me? Don’t be stupid. You’re no threat to me now, and you know it. And neither is that Seahawk you have up there looking for me. Thanks for the tip-off on your location.”

“We can see your helo up as well,” said Harada. “You’re getting sloppy, Karpov. I’ve got a fix on your 226 to within a 9 second certainty, and that nice fat battlecruiser of yours makes an easy target.”

“For what? We can count, Captain. You threw 8 SSMs at us, and the last we heard, your class has no internal magazines for reloads. Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, but it’s a long way to your home port in 2021, and I don’t think you made the trip lately.”

Both sides had helos up, each looking for the other. They saw each other clearly enough on their radars, but neither had acquired a surface ship contact. The Seahawk off *Takami* had moved out about 50 nautical miles from the ship, and it located the KA-226 Karpov had launched for maritime surveillance, pegging its position 220 miles slightly southeast of Ponape.

Behind *Takami*, Admiral Kita’s task force was moving in two groups, cruising at a sedate 20 knots, with every ship observing EMCON, running dark. Their helos and planes were all armed and ready for the fight, and it appeared that Captain Harada’s plan had worked just as he imagined it would. Kita had the destroyer *Kirishima* out in front, followed by *Takami’s* sister ship *Atago*. Behind them came *Akagi* and *Kaga*, trailed by the destroyer *Kongo*. About 20 nautical miles behind this formation, the new DD escort *Takao* led the fleet replenishment ship *Omi*, which was attended by the old

helicopter destroyer *Kurama*. They were all on a heading of 195 south, but when *Takami* sent over the presumed location of the KA-226, Admiral Kita made a hard turn to port, coming to 240 degrees southwest, aiming right for that helo. *Takami* turned with them, heading right for Ponape, and expecting that their quarry was somewhere in the 260 plus miles of open ocean.

Kirov had been moving northwest on a course of 300 degrees, but now Karpov also turned to meet the expected heading of his adversary. The ship began a wide circle to the northeast an hour after sunrise. As for Gromyko, he was about 135 miles from *Kirov*, on the exact new heading Karpov had ordered.

Nikolin looked over at Karpov, indicating he had just received a communication from Blackbird. Their helo had just picked up the first surface contact of the day, and the data was being simultaneously fed to Rodenko's station, and also by secure datalink to *Kazan*. Karpov immediately ordered the contact designated 'Hostile,' and the game was on. The Russians had been moving north, intending to then turn northwest to bypass Ponape. *Kazan* was well ahead, about 150 miles to the northeast. The Japanese were coming south from Eniwetok, and so when *Takami* was spotted it was 165 nautical miles from *Kirov*, but only about 50 nautical miles northwest of Gromyko's boat. As soon as he received the contact data, the wily sub Captain immediately ordered a turn northwest to a heading of 295.

Kazan was cruising just over the thermocline layer at 20 knots, without even a whisper of cavitation at that speed. From that location, his depth about 420 feet, he could use his hull mounted sonar to listen to contacts above him, and then also deploy a towed sonar array, which would descend down below the layer. That was the deep sound channel, where noise traveled best in the ocean. He seldom went there, except to pass through to a deeper region of the sea, or perhaps to simply hover there, silent and still, letting Chernov's ears feast in that sound channel.

Now the element of surprise was acting as the dealer in this poker game, handing out cards to both sides. Harada had no idea that Karpov was really gunning for him, or that *Kazan* even existed, and he was now being hunted by two very dangerous opponents. Yet Karpov had no idea Kita's task force was out their either, as it was well beyond his own surface radar range, and his Blackbird had only just picked up *Takami*, while Kita's ships were now between 75 and 130 nautical miles behind his leading picket.

Karpov also thought he was simply about to try and spear a slippery fish with his missiles. He knew *Takami* still had her potent SAM defenses, but he was unaware that they had replenished all their SSMs from the stores aboard *Omi*, and now had been restored to full inventory on all missiles.

"Mister Rodenko," said Karpov. "What is their present heading?"

"Sir, they are running on 215 degrees, at 20 knots. They're aimed right at us."

"Interesting. That Seahawk of theirs must have spotted us as well. I could fire on it now, but their ship is fairly close, is it not?"

"About 35 miles west of the helo," said Rodenko. "They might cover that with their SAM envelope."

"Yes… So we'll wait. That helo isn't any threat, at least not to us. Since we're data linked to *Kazan*, Gromyko knows it's there and can act accordingly. Let's just ease on in a little closer. I'll get it in a moment. As for *Takami*, I'd prefer to use the Moskit-II system instead of our MOS-IIIs."

"You could hit them now with the Moskit system if we use the lighter 250kg warheads," said Fedorov.

"Yes, but I think we'll get in closer, throw four Moskit-IIs and follow them with a Zircon Mos-III."

"You expect them to let you close the range?"

"Well, have a look for yourself, Fedorov. They're coming right at us. Brazen little bastards, yes?"

Karpov did not know it, but his hubris was leading him to make his first great mistake. He was unconcerned about being spotted, which was something he would have worked hard to prevent under any other circumstances. But he did not think *Takami* could hurt him, so why worry about being detected? He was already running with all sensors active, indifferent to any threat. Yet Fedorov seemed uncomfortable with this scenario, and Karpov turned, giving him a look.

"Something bothering you?" he asked his number one.

"This just doesn't feel right…." Fedorov had a look on his face that Karpov had seen many times before. "Why would they be vectoring in on us like this if they had no means of hurting us? They have everything to lose, and nothing to gain."

"Frankly," said Karpov, "they can have only one thing in mind. First off, they're just under 170 nautical miles out. So they probably think we can only

hit them with the P-900s at the moment, and I'm betting they are assuming we have very few of those. They don't realize we can modify the range of both our MOS-III and Moskit-II systems. We've got the extended range components in inventory, and I had them all mounted on the MOS-IIIs after that last engagement. So we've really got range on those missiles now, our premium strike weapon. That's why I'd prefer not to tip my hand on them just yet, and hold those cards tight. So I'm thinking they may believe we have very few of the P-900s left. They've been counting heads too since our last engagement."

"Correct," said Fedorov. "We have only six left, but why would they court trouble with us here at all, under any circumstances? This doesn't make sense."

Karpov thought about that. "Yes, now that you say this, it does seem odd. Perhaps he was coming south to help defend Truk. Perhaps he's just trying to thumb his nose at us."

"To distract us away from another high value target," said Fedorov, and that got Karpov's attention.

"A carrier group?" That was the only high value target worth anything in Karpov's mind. Fedorov's suspicions had just hit pay dirt, though neither man had any notion of just where that suspected carrier group was, and what it was carrying.

"You think they may be planning another ambush… With a carrier group out there somewhere?"

"Why else would they be doing this? Why the direct radio contact? Why are they vectoring in on us now? I don't like it."

"Alright… If they did have a carrier group, where would it be?"

"North," said Fedorov. "That ship is a key fleet defense asset. They would use it as a forward picket, and the carriers would be north. They could even have planes in the air at this very minute. We're well within strike range of WWII carrier planes now."

"But we can easily defeat such a strike," said Karpov.

"Yes, but for a price. It will cost us more missiles."

"I'll hold all our longer range SAMs in that event, and just use the short range stuff. You may be correct here, Fedorov, but let's wait a while, and see what they do. *Kazan* has likely turned, and Gromyko will be creeping up on them by now. He will be much closer, and he has the Zircon. That missile

would get to them before they have a chance to react."

* * *

"Got them!" Lieutenant Otani reported from her station on the SPY-1. "I have them bearing 262, on a heading of 47 degrees, at 20 knots. Contact reported by the Seahawk, sir. The Russian is emitting on everything: Fly Screen, Palm Frond, Roundhouse, Tombstone and Top Plate. I can even pick up his short and medium range fire control radars. He's lit up like an American Christmas tree."

"Excellent," said Harada. "We've done our job. Miss Shiota, make sure Admiral Kita has that data, and it looks like the ball's in his court now. Open that channel to Karpov."

Harada smiled. He wanted to keep this fish on the line as long as possible, and decided to tell Karpov something plausible he might believe in this scenario.

"Ahoy *Kirov*," he said over the com system. "I intend to pull every tooth you have if I can. So my bow is pointed right at you, and you can throw away as many missiles as you want. Our SM-2s are hungry this morning. Over." He gave Fukada a smile, and the two men stood there waiting, arms folded, the tension rising. It was like waving your arms at a Grizzly Bear. *Takami* was going to play the lure as long as possible, hoping to rouse Karpov's ire and get him to waste missiles. Seconds later, they got a rude alert.

"Sir, the Seahawk reports a vampire! They put a missile on it!"

Karpov had decided not to make the game so easy for the Japanese. He ordered up an S-400 and had it on its way, feeling just a little better now that his first missile had joined the argument with Captain Harada. The time for words was over.

Out on that Seahawk, the pilot had been up at 12,000 feet to get good radar coverage of the sea to the south, elated to finally spot their enemy. Then the missile warning jarred like a shock, and he knew he was in grave danger. Reporting the surface contact, he switched off his radars, toggled on any offensive ECM he had, and then dove. His helo was fairly agile as he desperately tried to avoid the missile, but it had already locked on and was not fooled. The S-400 ran true, and the Seahawk was dead ten seconds later…

Otani looked over at Harada, her eyes carrying the message plainly enough. “We lost them, sir. The Seahawk is gone.”

“Damn,” Harada swore, looking at Fukada. “That was one hell of a long shot. They must be packing the S-400 Triumf system.”

“We could even the score,” said Fukada. “Put an SM-3 on their helo.”

“That might feel good, but they have those damn Zircons, and the SM-3 is a good defensive weapon for that. At least our boys didn’t die in vain. We’ve got their location. Let’s hope Admiral Kita jumps on them. They just saw that helo go down too.”

* * *

Kita did see the Seahawk fall, and was none too happy about it. Yet now that they had *Kirov’s* position, he was going to get some payback. The F-35’s were up on the decks of *Kaga* and *Akagi*, and ready to climb for the clearing blue skies.

Kaga led the strike launches, allocating eight F-35’s armed with the GBU-53. Instead of sending three *Shotai* of three planes each, Kita opted to send two heavy *Shotai*, each with four planes, and hold one F-35 in reserve. The first, designated Kaga-1, would fly west, hopefully staying well out of range of the Russian helo’s radar, and then turn south to have their run at *Kirov*. Kaga-2 would fly a similar pattern, only moving east. Then *Akagi* followed by launching a SEAD package on one plane. Captain Yoshida would then set up a single *Shotai* of three planes, each one carrying four JSOW glide missiles. They would take a more direct vector on the contact, and all groups would attempt to coordinate their strike as they neared the target. It was a classic “Champagne” attack as the service called it, three groups with the two on the wings forward, and the JSOWs in the center slightly behind. All the pilots knew they were cleared hot, and would need no authorization from their home carrier to release their ordnance. Yoshida held the remainder of his planes in reserve for a possible second strike, which was always a wise precaution.

“Saturation,” said Admiral Kita. “Go get ‘em. If our planes get close enough to throw, that will put 64 GBU/53s in the air and 12 of the JSOW munitions all coming in at different angles to the target. Alright, let’s get the air defense ships out in front. Send to *Kongo*, and have them join *Atago* and

Kirishima in a fan forward of our heading. The ship will come to starboard on 090. Signal *Akagi* to match our heading and speed. We'll move off towards the *Omi* Group."

The F-35B was capable of hovering and taking off vertically if required, and could also use the short flight deck. Built at great cost as a replacement for aging 4th generation fighters, it had seen increasing deployments in Western navies by 2021. Japan had a very few at the outset of the conflict, and Kita was quite fortunate to have so many here at his disposal.

The plane had been built as a strike fighter more than a dog fighter for the Navy. In early testing, many thought it would not have the agility to fight in close with even good 4th Generation fighters. In those engagements, it was built to rely on stealth and long range missile attack before it came to a dogfight. None of that was at issue here, and the plane's outstanding ability to carry strike ordnance was now clearly evident.

Yet there were no fast ship killing missiles in the Western bag of tricks. Where the Russians relied on the lightning speed and range of a missile like the Zircon, and even the older Onyx (Moskit II) class missiles, the US Navy armed its planes with the Long Range Anti-Ship Missile, (LRASM), but the Japanese did not have any of those. Instead they would rely on a time-honored and well proven strike munition—the smart bomb. But unlike the dumb bombs carried by the planes of 1943, these weapons could be released 40 to 60 nautical miles from their targets, and they would glide into battle using infra-red and radar seeking capability, as well as inertial navigation.

The Germans had come up with a very similar idea, and they called it the Fritz-X, a radio controlled glide bomb that produced some dramatic results in the Med. The main difference was that the guidance was not on board the bomb, but in the plane that launched it. Kita's smart bombs could be released, and left to their own devices. They would deploy small winglets, and begin their gliding descent from the heavens, like a rain of meteors, slow, silent and yet very deadly.

Now his birds were in the air, and so he would turn his carriers away from the action, taking them back to join *Omi*. The three escorting destroyers would adjust speed and charge forward to deploy their AA defense screen. Everything was up to the F-35's, the best shot Kita had at putting some harm on *Kirov*. If the first wave failed, he still had planes ready for a second strike. For now, his strike was up and on its way at 08:30 hours, and *Kirov* was soon

to be visited by some most unexpected adversaries in the skies east of Ponape.

Chapter 33

Harada was not happy about the loss of his Seahawk, but he thought they could not yet risk having one of the other ships send up a replacement. If the enemy saw a second helo, it would immediately raise a question as to where it could have originated. He knew the Russian helos would be able to see it did not come from his ship, and they were being very careful, keeping their helos well out of range of his SM-2 missiles, to keep an eye on things like that.

Yet the loss of aerial radar assist was a real liability. He turned to his XO, a question in mind. “Should we have Kita get up another helo?”

“Now or never,” said Fukada. “The Russian helos probably haven’t seen any of Kita’s ships yet. If Kita launches and our birds come in low, they probably won’t spot them either.”

“Alright, I’ll make the suggestion, but I suppose it will be up to the Admiral.” He had Ensign Shiota send a quick message requesting helicopter support, and advising low altitude approach until they were inside estimated Russian radar coverage zones. It was all a game of cat and mouse, as if chess might be played by allowing one player to move a piece while the other fellow wasn’t watching the board. That was the essence of modern combat at sea like this. Those that could see their enemy, could kill. At the moment, the score was even, each side had seen the other, but Karpov had more eyes in the sky, and the Japanese needed to match that capability.

The word was passed to *Kongo* on the forward defense line**.** She was in the center position, with destroyers flanking her some 25 miles to either side. Each one had a Seahawk, and *Kongo* got the nod.

* * *

At a little after 08:45 local time, Rodenko reported the KA-226, Blackbird, was running low on fuel. Karpov ordered it home, and had their last KA-40 launch to take its place and give him aerial radar coverage to the east. The other KA-40 was patrolling to the west. He also turned to approach Blackbird, hoping to close the range for it a bit and ease recovery.

Kita’s Kaga-1 *Shotai* was already well inside the radar envelope of the KA-40 to the west, but the Russians saw nothing. The inherent stealth of the F-35 was now another dangerous factor weighing heavily in the equation for the Japanese.

But both sides could play that game, and Captain Ivan Gromyko was continuing to make a very quiet approach to *Takami* as all this was going on. *Kazan* had picked up the Japanese ship’s position, prompting Gromyko to order an immediate turn to port. He had been cruising due west on a heading of 270 for the last half hour, running just above the layer. With his depth at 420 feet, he ordered *Kazan* to put on speed at 09:15, increasing to 28 knots.

The Captain’s intention was to get in as tight on *Takami* as he could before the other side might locate him. The closer he was, the less reaction time his enemy might have on defense, for his missiles were very fast. He was presently about 32 nautical miles from his quarry, and on a course to intercept, which he now adjusted slightly to account for the speed change. His *Starpom*, Lieutenant Commander Belanov, was at his side, the bridge quiet and serious, as it always was when Gromyko was present. They had been running in EMCON mode, having received the *Takami’s* location long ago from Blackbird before he went deep.

“We’re close enough to give them a shave,” said Belanov. “Those Zircons are quick.”

“True,” said Gromyko. “I could ruin their day right here and now, but if I get a little closer, inside torpedo range, all the better.”

Gromyko had the patience of a saint when it came to combat. He saw the Japanese Seahawk go down, and as far as he was concerned, *Takami* was already dead. They had no helo in the air that could bother him now, so as long as he stayed outside a ten mile range, they had no other ASW weapon aboard that could touch him. His own UGST Fizik-1 Torpedoes could reach out 22 nautical miles if necessary, though he preferred to fire them much closer in. So he was very close to his target now, creeping up like a cat about to spring on its unwary prey. He might have fired his RPK-7 torpedoes earlier, but being a rocket assisted weapon, that would have given up his position. If he wanted to do that, he’d use something much better. When he fired his cruise missiles, the enemy would know approximately where he was, but there would be little they could do about it, or so he believed at that moment.

As always, it was not what you knew, but what you did *not* know in modern combat that could kill you. Gromyko was still unaware that *Kongo* already had another Seahawk up, moving south at low elevation, and still unseen by either of Karpov's KA-40s. Yet at the same time, the Japanese had no inkling that a modern Russian sub would be in the mix, and that helo had been loaded out for maritime surveillance. Now this three dimensional chess game was about to go from a sedate series of opening moves, to the heat and fire of the middle game. Karpov was leading by a pawn, but the Japanese had heavy pieces bearing down on him, and they were about to make themselves known.

* * *

Rodenko saw the data link from Blackbird on his screen, scratching his head. "Sir, new airborne contact, bearing 50 degrees northeast, range 175 nautical miles, speed 480."

"480 knots?"

"Yes sir, and I have it on a direct heading to our ship—245 degrees."

"Show me." Karpov was hovering over Rodenko's station, seeing the contact lit up in yellow. "That can't be another helo off *Takami*."

"No sir," said Rodenko. "Their Seahawks can run at about 155 knots, so it has to be a plane."

"Then they have a carrier nearby."

"Wait just a moment!" It was Fedorov, that look on his face again, and Karpov was very lucky he had him on the bridge at that moment. "There's no Japanese plane in their current carrier inventory that can make 480 knots. That's almost 200 knots faster than their Zero fighters." His voice was edged with warning, his eyes dark and serious.

"What's out there, Rodenko?" Karpov had his eyes fixed on that contact, his voice prodding his radar man for more information.

"Contact reads class unknown. I have it at 36,000 feet, and steady at 480 knots."

"That's 4,000 feet above the Zero's service ceiling as well," said Fedorov.

"Could they have a new plane?" Karpov gave him a searching glance.

"The Nakajima C6N *Saiun* could fly that high, but sir, the *speed*. Rodenko is reporting 480 knots. The Zero was fast for this time, and never

exceeded 350 knots, typically operating at about 280. The only plane that could approach that speed might be the Ki-84, the plane the Allies called Frank, but the first one didn't come off the production lines until August of this year." The F-35's could double their present speed, but they were still cruising, hoping to get in unnoticed.

"This makes no sense…." Karpov could not grasp how the Japanese could have a plane that fast, and if there was a carrier out there, why would Rodenko only see a single aircraft? They typically launched in waves. He wanted more information. "Move Turkey 2 on a heading to intercept that contact." He was going to have one of the KA-40s take a better look. "See if they can refine their information. Something is wrong here."

"Damn wrong," said Fedorov. "Unless…."

"What?" Karpov turned, his eyes hard on Fedorov, waiting.

"Suppose this Japanese destroyer had a jump jet on its aft deck?"

"Contact has closed to 125 miles," said Rodenko.

Now Karpov was all business.

"Mark it hostile." There was a hard edge to his tone. "We shoot first, and ask questions later. Samsonov—get me a firing solution on that thing."

"Sir, I can put an S-400 on it now."

"Do so, one missile. Let's see what happens." Then he turned to Fedorov. "Check your chronometers, or sun and moon data—whatever it is you do. See that we haven't moved in time. That has to be a jet aircraft out there, and I want to know why. For the time being, I'll buy your theory about a jump-jet on the fantail. It would have to be a Harrier, or even an F-35B. That's the vertical takeoff and landing model, but let's see what our missile does."

The seconds ticked off as the S-400 streaked in at its target. It was the SEAD plane out in front of Akagi's *Shotai* carrying the JSOW missile payloads. The S-400 was very good. It saw the target increase speed to over 620 knots and turn. The F-35 deployed countermeasures, decoys attempting to seduce the active radar seeker on the missile as it now closed for the kill. It had perhaps a 25% chance of succeeding, but the S-400 did not bite. It turned for the target, ran true, and exploded.

"Hit!" said Rodenko. "Target destroyed!"

Karpov smiled. "So much for their little surprise," he said. "They must have launched that bird earlier, and sent it north of their position like that. Then this Harada got on the line and tried to play patty cake with me on the

radio. A little theater here. I'm half tempted to call him again and see what he thinks now."

Before Karpov had any more time to gloat, Rodenko sounded off with yet another string of contacts. They were on the same heading as the first plane, and now the little surprise became something more.

"Con, new airborne contact—same heading, speed 480, at 36,000 feet." He gave Karpov an astonished look. "I'm reading *three* planes."

Three brief seconds passed in Karpov's mind, one for each of those planes. They rang the alarm in his head like a great hammer striking a bell. He might explain away one plane, a little secret harbored by *Takami* to throw at him like this, but he could not explain three planes. He passed the briefest moment, stunned by the report. Then the rush of adrenaline took over, and the synapses of his brain fired in response. He had lightning fast computers at his beck and call, but his mind had to process that signal first, and set the defensive abilities of the ship in motion. He did not waste another half second with speculation concerning his enemy, or worries over inventory on hand. Wheeling about, he looked Samsonov in the eye and said one word.

"Fire!"

The big CIC Chief knew exactly how to interpret that command, his own reflexes well-honed for battle. All the while, Grilikov, sitting at his side again like the devil's adjutant, stared in wide eyed suspense.

Three planes, three targets, three missiles. Samsonov was quick to get his weapons keyed and on their way, the deadly S-400s. The development of the S-400 Triumf was in some ways a response to missiles like the American Patriot air defense system. The S-300 had begun that way as well, a land deployed mobile missile that would fire from a canister bearing four launch tubes. It was an excellent "denial of airspace" attack on intruding aircraft, but the S-300 had always been designed with naval deployment in mind, a perfect candidate for the vertical launch modules installed on big ships like *Kirov*.

The Russians had long ago claimed that they had a system in that weapon that could find, track, and kill 5th Generation stealth fighters like the F-35. Now it was about to be put to a real-time test. NATO called the missile the SA-21 Growler when it was first deployed in 2016. Later it would evolve as the worthy successor to the S-300 SAMs used by the Russian Navy, the Gargoyles to NATO, and be replaced by an even better missile, the S-500,

which had not been widely deployed by the time war broke out in 2021.

For now, the Triumf was about the best SAM the Russians had, fast at Mach 7, and it could range out 215 nautical miles, with a blast fragmentation warhead that was like shooting a 12 gauge shotgun at a chicken at close range when it exploded.

There were no emissions coming from the planes, so Karpov could not be certain just what he had in front of him, but he knew it had bad intent, and he knew that Samsonov had done exactly the right thing in selecting that weapon. You always lead with your Ace.

“A nice little rat’s nest out there,” he said to Fedorov, amazingly cool given the shock they all just had.

“Yes sir, those have to be enemy strike planes—modern day equipment. But how?”

“Ours is not to reason why,” said Karpov. “Not now, not in combat. It’s kill or be killed at this moment, and I want to live.”

“Sir,” said Rodenko. “The KA-40 has sent a refinement. We’ve got a hot fix on those bogies! They’re reading as F-35B Lightning fighter jets!”

Karpov’s jaw clenched. Now, with his missiles on the way, he reached for an answer. “Fedorov? Have we moved? Are we still in 1943?”

“There’s been no observable change I can put my finger on,” said Fedorov. “The sun is up, and just where it should be.”

“Mister Nikolin… Can you pick up that station you’ve been listening to?”

“Aye sir. Radio Tokyo is still on the air.”

“Then what in God’s name is going on here?” Karpov looked at the screen, his eyes glued on the thin lines tracing the path of his S-400s towards the contact.

“The fantail on *Takami* could not hold anything more,” said Fedorov, seeming to be a hundred miles away now. “I’m damn sure we haven’t moved in time. No explanation, sir, unless our system is malfunctioning.”

“No time for a diagnostic.” said Karpov. “I’ll treat any further contact as hostile and act accordingly.”

Karpov was reacting on pure instinct, and his reflex was sure and steady. One part of his mind said this shouldn’t be happening, but then again, he and his ship shouldn’t even be there in 1943. Now something else clearly *was* there, and it was reading as a denizen of his own long lost future in 2021. He didn’t care how it came to be there, he would just fight it.

Seconds later the S-400s were beginning their terminal radar search. They began to eat away the last interval of space between the their warheads and those planes. This time, instead of one plane trying to spoof the oncoming attack, there were three, all deploying their decoys and turning at high speed. That improved the odds on defense considerably. Each missile had perhaps a 50% chance of getting a kill, but they all would roll good dice that minute, and all three would find pay dirt. The three explosions were clearly seen on Rodenko' screen, and the odds on the Russians getting four planes like that so easily had been very long. They just got lucky.

"Targets eliminated!" said Samsonov, clearly pleased with himself.

Yes… They had been very lucky, getting to those planes just minutes before they would reach their release point on ordnance. Those three targets would have become twelve targets in a hot minute, but Karpov's immediate reflex to fire had won him a big advantage. The centermost *Shotai* in Kita's attack was gone, but there were still eight planes out there, one group due north, another coming in at a 45 degree angle, and neither of the KA-40s had seen them. They were just now reaching their maximum throw range on the GBU/53s, and they were about to open those weapons bays and let loose the dogs of war.

All hell was about to break loose.

Part XII

The Perfect Moment

"Shallow men believe in luck or in circumstance. Strong men believe in cause and effect."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter 34

“Bear!” said Rodenko, seeing another enemy plane. At 10:23 his screen lit up with scarlet, the blood red contacts piling up as his system reported the position of Kita’s other two groups. “Four unidentified aircraft due north, same elevation and speed increasing through 600 knots. It looks like they’ve put ordnance in the air. Wolfhounds! I’m reading multiple contact clusters. And I’m getting another off axis airborne contact—Bears—with more hounds in the air at 45 degrees northeast. My god, I have 64 separate contacts inbound!”

The Western brevity code would had tagged the planes as ‘Bogies,’ and the missiles or bombs as ‘Vampires.’ No one knew much about Russian brevity code, short phrases meant to convey a quick message in the heat of battle. The crew of *Kirov* had long used the word ‘bear’ to indicate a hostile contact, and the wolfhounds that ran with it were the enemy missiles and bombs.

Karpov could not believe what he was hearing. F-35B fighters had been clearly identified by his systems, and they were coming in fast and furious. While he had concentrated his SAMs on the first group they spotted in the center, two other groups had remained undetected on the wings until they suddenly delivered their ordnance, and his mind was already racing through his own internal database to determine what might be coming his way. Those planes could carry the American Joint Standoff Attack Missile, but not in such numbers, and not released at that range.

Sixty-four Wolfhounds….

“Rodenko! Do you have the planes that made that delivery?”

“Yes sir. They are turning and breaking off to the north.”

“How many did you say? Quick!”

“Two groups of four planes each.”

“Range to leading hound?”

“62 nautical miles, sir. Inbound at a little over 550 knots.”

Bears and Wolfhounds. Planes and unfriendly ordnance inbound on his ship. There was only one way the human side of him could respond.

“Damn!” Karpov swore. Now he knew what his enemy had just thrown at him. “Smart bombs!” he said. “They have to be GBU-53s.”

He had spent hours and hours studying American Naval strike ordnance to learn their characteristics and applications, and match them to the aircraft that could carry them. He knew all the typical loadouts common to the F-35. It was one reason why he was so good in combat. His razor sharp mind for battle was operating on top of a thick database of real knowledge. The F-35 could carry the GBU-53, and one loadout configuration allowed for eight bombs to be carried in the internal weapons bay. Its optimal release point was about 60 nautical miles out, and that's what Rodenko had just reported to him: eight planes, 64 hounds in the air running subsonic, unthinking death from above, gliding towards him with precision navigation systems and a host of other sensors guiding them in.

Smart bomb munitions were central to the American bag of tricks in naval combat, but who was out there? How did it get here? He could not answer those questions. His mind was all focused on the adrenaline of fight or flight, and for Karpov every synapse in a situation like this screamed at him to fight.

"Helm, ahead flank and hard to port. Come to 145!"

This was going to cost him—big time—where missile inventory was concerned, but it was sink or swim now. The life of the ship and crew was at stake here. His own life, and all his heated aspirations, were on the line, in the crosshairs of those incoming wolfhounds. It wasn't time, or fate, or the devious will of an opponent like Volkov that was gunning for him now. It was a string of glide bombs, mindless metal, yet seeking his life with their deviously engineered electronic sensors, both radar and infra-red.

"Rodenko," he said, his voice controlled and steady. "Deploy all offensive ECM systems."

"Aye sir."

"Samsonov! Switch to full automatic and fire at the group bearing 045—salvos of six. *Fire!"*

* * *

"String of pearls!" shouted Hideo Honjo at the CIC aboard *Takami*. They had been watching the battle unfold in the phosphorescence of their own sensor suite, and saw that first missile targeted at the lead plane off *Akagi*. Their planes had taken the direct approach to the contact, while those off *Kaga* had moved off axis to come at *Kirov* from two other angles.

They saw the lead plane get hit, the crew reacting with disappointment. When the next Russian SAM salvo struck home, there was an audible reaction from the bridge crew. Harada looked over his shoulder, feeling the same as his crew did, but knowing he had to hold it all inside.

“See to your work,” he said sternly. “This fellow nearly took us out the last time we saw him, and we have to be damn good to survive out here. Now get it done.” Tensions rose in the silence that followed until Honjo shouted out that epithet—string of pearls. He was describing the ordnance being delivered by the strike planes, all lined up on his screen.

They saw the Russian ship firing again, this time throwing serious metal. They were ignoring *Takami* completely, their defense now a flurry of SAMs directed at those vampires.

“Good,” Harada said under his breath. “Throw your eggs, you bastard. You’ve got to be letter perfect now, and there’s 64 smart bombs heading your way. Anything you use now is one less missile under that deck when we get close enough to get in this fight.”

They watched, spellbound, as all of 64 JDAMs dotted the screen, descending from that high altitude towards the Russian ship. Then they picked up two more very fast contacts that the system identified as the Zircon SS-N-33s. *Kirov* must have thrown something their way, and he authorized the use of the best long range defense asset that might have a chance at getting them—his Standard Missile 3. They had been designed to get out after ballistic missiles inbound on a carrier task force, and the Zircon running close to Mach 6 was in that same speed category. It was now going to be a contest between the very best ship killer the Russian technology had designed, against the best defense the Americans had to offer.

RIM-161B did exactly what it was designed for that day. The missiles rose with alarming speed, tracking unfailingly as they sipped data from the network of sensors playing on those two Russian speed demons. But the SM-3 was the crown jewel in the US Aegis defense system, with a Mark 104 rocket boost sustainer that was capable of throwing that missile out at the dizzying speed of 5750 knots. The Block 1 version could make Mach 10. Block 2 and later versions could go even faster at Mach 15. It was a hypersonic killer the likes of which the world had never seen, and now the two sets of missiles closed on one another like bolts of lightning jousting in the sky. The SM-3 would have the hot minute to its credit that day. Both

missiles ran true. The semi-active radar homing suite found the Zircons, tracked them accurately, and the SM-3s blew them to hell.

Harada breathed a sigh of relief. He was even surprised that Karpov had bothered to throw those missiles at him, but he had just showed his adversary that *Takami* could still fight, slapping aside the very best missile his enemy had. Now all he had to do was get close enough to let his own SSMs fly. The ordnance delivered by *Kaga* and *Akagi* was already in the air. Karpov had taken out all the JSOW missiles on those planes before they could deploy, but all the smart bombs were still inbound, and yes, Hideo Honjo had called the tune. He could see the GBU/53s strung out like a string of pearls in the sky.

A sleek bomb when it launched, the weapon deployed a pair of long thin wings to begin its glide into the target. They were not rocket assisted in any way, moving with the sheer momentum imparted by the plane delivering the ordnance. That momentum, the wings, and gravity were doing all the work, and it amounted to a deadly saturation attack on a single target like this. By now, all of Kita's surviving planes off the *Kaga* had turned for home, but that first salvo of six Growlers fired by Samsonov went out after them, and he had followed up by adding two more at the end.

Of the four F-35's in the eastern group, he would get two, the others evading and living to return to *Kaga*. Nothing had been fired at the planes in the northern group, and they would all escape to return home, for now Karpov had more to worry about than the planes. In less than ten minutes, those smart bombs would converge on his ship with a lethal attack from two directions. His decks were bristling with missiles, though he had very few of his longer range SAMs remaining. His second line of defense was the Klinok system, an upgraded version of the original missile, only with much extended range.

"Samsonov. Cease fire on the S-400s. Switch to the Klinok system and fire at will. Target the same eastern group. Now!"

In they came, and now *Kirov's* defensive response was coming down to brief minutes of potential life remaining as the first salvo of missiles went out to challenge those glide bombs. The bombs had been delivered from a very high altitude to get the range required to reach their intended target. So they were coming down at a range above the Klinok / Gauntlet system until they got inside 40 nautical miles. As soon as the missile could reach them, *Kirov* started to fire.

* * *

The tension in that moment was extreme, and nowhere more intense than in Karpov's mind. He had gamed attacks like these a hundred times on the simulators, and they were never pretty. Throw enough metal at a target, and something was bound to get through. Yes, something always gets through, he thought.

Yet in most scenarios he ran, he had faced ordnance packages of no more than 32 Wolfhounds inbound at any one time. Even then, the odds were still not good for the ship. This was why it was always imperative that you find and attack the incoming enemy strike group before it could get to their weapon release point. The JSOW *Shotai* off *Akagi* had to get to a range of 40 nautical miles to release, which allowed *Kirov* to see and kill them before they could get close enough to do harm. Yet they had not even seen the other strike groups off the *Kaga* until they were already releasing their bombs. That was mute testimony to the effectiveness of the F-35B as a stealthy aircraft. Those planes had flown right through the overlapping radar circles of both the Russian KA-40s, completely undetected. It was only when those weapons bay doors opened, enlarging their radar return, that they were finally seen.

Stealth was a physical thing, built into the structure and design of the aircraft itself. It was achieved by design angles and exotic materials, and in this case, it worked exactly as planned. The Japanese did not have the better US standoff weapons, but the planes had gotten in close enough to deliver what they had in the magazines.

Seconds passed, and Karpov suddenly realized in one awful moment that his ship was dead. *64 Wolfhounds….* He had fought them in the simulators, battling the soft phosphor glow on the battle screens, but never once beat more than 30 incoming weapons. As good as the missiles were beneath that forward deck, the sheer mass of the attack would always see at least one or two bombs get through. This time those odds were doubled down, impossibly long, *64 wolfhounds!*

In a split second his mind did the one thing it had always done when pressed into an impossible corner. His hand was moving to the missile key around his neck before he even reached a certain conclusion in his thoughts. At the same moment, he turned to Grilikov, pointing at him with two fingers

extended on his right hand. It had been a pre-arranged signal between the two men, and as Karpov reached Samsonov's station, Grilikov stood, a vast looming presence there, and pulled a second missile key from a chain around his neck.

"Samsonov—Moskit II, bank four, missile number sixteen. Program it for high altitude profile. Here is your target." Karpov tapped the screen, indicating where he wanted the missile directed.

"Aye sir."

Fedorov stood there, suddenly realizing what was happening. Karpov was already inserting his missile key into the CIC panel, the first authorization to fire the weapon in question, Grilikov's big hand was right next to his, the devil and his deep dark shadow, side by side.

"On my mark…"

"What are you doing Karpov?"

"Not now Fedorov! Grilikov, turn!"

Both men rotated their keys, and the board lit up. It winked red three times, then went yellow as the missile accepted and acknowledged the attack profile that Samsonov had sent to it. A second later it went green, indicating it was ready to fire. Karpov did not hesitate one second more. He flipped up the protective plastic key mask, and pushed his thumb firmly down to fire the missile. The klaxon of doom sounded loudly, deep and jarring amid the whooshing hiss of the Klinok missiles that were still firing. Then one of the larger forward hatches opened on that long red deck, and the Sunburn was up in a roar of angry fire, climbing into the sky.

Fedorov was slack jawed. Karpov had given him the second missile key, and he instinctively reached to feel for it, finding it was still there on the chain around his neck. But Karpov had given Grilikov a third key, insurance that any fire order he would give would certainly be obeyed. Fedorov knew exactly what had happened here, chiding himself for thinking Karpov was a leopard that could ever change his spots. That number sixteen missile was carrying a nuclear warhead.

"Set missile for manual detonation," said Karpov, and Samsonov toggled a switch, his thick finger poised, eyes on the Admiral, the first glimmer of fear awakening there. The CIC Chief knew exactly what Karpov was doing, and if his commanding officer had to resort to such measures, Samsonov knew the ship was now in the gravest possible danger.

The seconds ticked off, the Sunburn raged into the sky. Karpov took a deep breath and looked at Rodenko, who was watching him closely now. “EMCON,” he said. “All systems dark.”

“All systems dark, aye sir.” Rodenko repeated, instinctively knowing what Karpov was doing. If the weapon produced an EMP burst, the chance their electronics would receive damage was lessened when they were toggled off. For good measure, Rodenko put the system into Shield Mode, cross circuiting to a different set of relays that were highly shielded against EMP.

Then Karpov watched the Plexiglas screen, seeing the fast track of his killer missile about to reach the long string of inbound ordnance. He looked down at Samsonov and gave the final order.

“Detonate warhead.”

Chapter 35

Everyone on the bridge shirked when it went off. Karpov instinctively raising a hand to shield his eyes. He had fired the Moskit II with a 200 Kiloton warhead at the northern group of Wolfhounds, and the massive fireball, even fifty nautical miles away, dominated the entire seascape now. The blast was sufficient to destroy or divert the entire group of 32 smartbombs, consumed by the shock and fire of that terrible nuclear detonation.

There came a quavering sound on the air, and a little later the shock wave hit the ship, rattling equipment all over the bridge. The crew were now mesmerized by the display in the sky, and Karpov realized it was the first time they would have seen such a thing. That was not the case for him. He had thrown his first warhead at his enemies long ago, in the cold north Atlantic, the end of the American battlegroup that had been centered on the battleship *Mississippi*. Having seen what such a blow could accomplish, he fired his second special warhead in 1945, destroying, among other things, the vaunted battleship *Iowa*.

The quavering sound became a wind, dark, soulless, passing over the ship like a banshee. A strange glow surrounded them, and for the briefest moment, Karpov, looking at Fedorov, saw the other man vanish. An instant later Fedorov was still there, his face pallid and eyes wide as he looked around, struggling to determine what was happening.

There came a groaning sound, a low counterpoint to the last missile sent off by *Kirov* before Karpov turned to Samsonov and ordered him to cease fire. Now all of Fedorov's dire warnings presented themselves in Karpov's mind. Time was fractured, unstable, prone to increasing damage by the power of massive detonations like the one Karpov had just set off, twenty times bigger than the bombs at Hiroshima or Nagasaki The sound deepened, descended, and Karpov seemed to feel as though he were riding a fast moving elevator. Slowly, the feeling subsided. He needed to know what was happening.

"Rodenko. Light us up again. I need to know what's out there." He looked at Fedorov, then tapped Grilikov's arm, nodding his head to the man

as if to say “at ease.” He walked slowly towards Rodenko’s station, one eye on Fedorov. Both men would have information he needed, but Rodenko’s status report was his first concern.

“I have nothing, sir,” said Rodenko. “I cross circuited to shielded systems before the detonation, and so I’m certain my system is functioning, but I read no contacts—not even the two KA-40s. We’ve lost our data link.”

“I neglected to have Nikolin put them into EMCON mode,” said Karpov. “They might have suffered EMP damage, and as our primary line on *Takami* was being fed by their radars, that could account for this situation.”

“But we should still be reading those Wolfhounds at 45 degrees,” said Rodenko. “Fregat could see those clearly enough inside sixty miles.”

Yet they were gone. Karpov had killed half the Wolfhounds with his 200 Kilotons of nuclear rage, but the others had simply vanished.

“Could they have been affected by the detonation?”

“They were well to the east, sir. Over 50 nautical miles, just as we were. For that matter… Where’s the goddamned fireball…” Rodenko was staring out the forward viewport, away from his screen now as he just realized his system wasn’t even seeing that fireball any longer. Then, even as he looked, he saw a soft glow in the distance, burning brighter, second by second, and by degrees, the fireball reappeared. He could see it in the sky, using nothing more than the old reliable Mark 1 Eyeball. Yet the top of the cloud had been sheared off by prevailing upper winds, a long ocher smear in the sky.

Rodenko’s systems fluttered briefly, then his screens seemed to light up again with fresh data, the colored symbols repopulating the Plexiglas conference screen between the CIC station and his own. Karpov looked at it, his eye going first to the 45 degree track that Samsonov had last been firing along. Those smartbombs might be getting very close by now… but they were gone. Could they have lost their hold on them? He squinted, looking through the forward panes, eyes searching for information stubbornly withheld by his electronic systems. He drifted over to Fedorov, a question in his eyes.

“Well,” he said in a low voice so the others could not hear. “Any idea what just happened?”

“What just happened? You lost your damn head again, that’s what happened.”

“Don’t get all bothered,” said Karpov quickly. “I did what was necessary.

You have no idea what was coming for us, but you heard Rodenko's report. There were sixty-four warheads out there looking for us, and it was almost certain that some of them were going to hit home. I've simulated it a hundred times at the academy. We could never stop more than thirty incoming Wolfhounds in a single saturation attack. This ship was dead, so I did what I had to do in order to even the odds. That warhead took out everything they threw at us to the north, allowing me to concentrate only on the bombs coming in at the 45 degree axis. Even then, it would have been a very near run thing, and it is likely we would have been hit by at least one GBU/53."

"What's that?"

Karpov smiled. "American smart bomb, slow, completely unpowered, but very accurate, even in hostile ECM environments. Those planes threw a fist full of hailstones at us, and believe me, it isn't easy to get them all in the very few minutes we had. So I did what was necessary, and you can thank me that we aren't all dead. We should be. Their attack was perfectly planned and executed, and that damn F-35 was so stealthy that the KA-40s never even saw the last two strike groups until they had already launched. They must have had something externally mounted on that first group, which made them a better radar target. We came this close to perdition, all of us." Karpov held up his thumb and index finger to measure out the slim interval of time that had saved the ship.

"We got the northern group of 32 bombs with that special warhead," he said again. "But what happened to the others?"

"Look at that fireball," said Fedorov. "See how the cloud has sheared off. That takes time, perhaps ten or twenty minutes. I think we phased when that detonation went off. You know what I said about time being so fragile now, and how we used to pulse and slip earlier on the first sortie."

"Yes…." Karpov breathed. "That makes sense. If we did phase, then those bombs may have come right in on us but—"

"We just weren't there in that moment." Fedorov finished his thought. "We phased. I'm almost sure of it."

Karpov smiled. "Well you can thank any God you'd care to pray to for that. Thank old Mother Time if you will. But Fedorov—have we moved? Have we gone to some other time?"

"I don't think so. That detonation cloud is still out there, plain as day. No, I think we've settled back into 1943, just where we were."

Then Rodenko spoke up again, confirming the issue. “I have re-established contact with both KA-40s.”

“Sir,” said Nikolin. “Blackbird is hovering and requesting permission to land. Very strange… They say they lost sight of the ship as they descended and couldn’t relocate us for over ten minutes. Now they have only three minutes fuel left.”

“Permission granted. Bring them in.”

Karpov gave Fedorov a knowing look. He felt his whole frame relax, the tension unwinding, but it left him feeling strangely weak. He walked slowly to the Captain’s chair, and took a seat, with Fedorov following him.

Fedorov reached for his missile key, intending to return it to Karpov, a sour expression on his face. “There’s no point in my having this.”

“What? Now don’t be so sensitive, Fedorov. I’m sorry, but I had only seconds to complete that missile launch—you understand? Seconds.”

“Oh I understand completely. You gave me this key, and made me *Starpom*, but all I seem to be good for here in your eyes is sorting out the time travel.”

“Come on, Fedorov. Don’t be that way. You know I trust your judgment.”

“Except when it comes to the use of special warheads.”

“I already told you,” said Karpov. “I had no time. A moment’s hesitation and those smart bombs would have been too close for me to do what I did. Grilikov is all synapse and nerve, and that was what that moment required. I could have no hesitation; no discussion. The missile had to be fired. If you want to discuss it now, be my guest, but hold on to that key. Under any other circumstances, I would have brought you in on the decision. In that situation, I had to make it alone.”

“And you made damn sure you had the means to do so. In fact, Grilikov is on the bridge for more reasons than turning missile keys, yes?”

“Well Fedorov… Let’s just say that a man once burned is twice guarded. I’ve had you raise the alarm and set Troyak and his Marines on me, and I’ve seen that one over there raise a ruckus,” he nodded at Rodenko, “though it was Zolkin that did the real meddling. That isn’t ever going to happen on this bridge again. If it takes Grilikov, then that’s what it takes. But why all this talk? We should all be glad for the breath we still have to waste on it. Forgive me, but let me check in with Rodenko.”

He looked over his shoulder. “Radar—anything out there I need to worry

about?”

“Sir, no airborne contacts, but we still have that Japanese destroyer. The datalinks are back up, and Turkey 1 has a good fix on their position. But the range has closed to 73 nautical miles, bearing 32 degrees. I have them on a heading of 216 degrees, at 30 knots. Designate Greybear.”

Karpov took a deep breath, finally able to relax, if only for a moment. “This confirms that we’ve settled in to the same time, right Fedorov?”

“It seem so, like a wave rolling over us. We may have only been out of phase with this time for a very brief moment.”

“A perfect moment,” said Karpov, somewhat buoyant now. “In that moment, death may have very well passed right through us in those thirty two glide bombs. Oh, if I had to fight them I would have probably taken down at least twenty-eight… But there were thirty two. If any of the others had struck us…” He didn’t have to finish.

“Then I guess we got lucky,” said Fedorov.

“Luck had nothing to do with it. I reached this end by taking decisive action when it was needed—cause an effect—and I was the cause. Of course I couldn’t foresee the exact effects of that detonation, but I’ll take the hand we were dealt after that. I traded that warhead for our lives, and the life of this ship. Now then… We have a lot more on our hands than we did an hour ago. Here we thought we were out to get *Takami*, and all the while, they were out to get us. It could be that these other forces were already in theater, and we just never knew about it. They may have arrived at the same time *Takami* did.”

“No way to really know,” said Fedorov, “unless you feel like chatting with Captain Harada again.”

“F-35’s…. The Japanese have those planes, and they can lift them on their *Izumo* class carriers. So my bet is that we’ve got one out there to the north. We faced twelve planes, and by god, this isn’t over. Those that got away safely could be landing on that carrier even as we speak. In training we figured four to six hours for turnover if they have to arm and refuel them again. Modern ordnance is a little more tricky than just latching on a dumb iron bomb, as in this war. But the dangerous fact remains that we could be facing another air attack, and very soon.”

Chief Biko stepped through the main bridge hatch, removing his cap. “Sir, damage control report. We had a few feathers ruffled by that shock

wave, and some minor EMP damage." Biko was all business. He had been as surprised as anyone else when the nuke went off, but that want not his business. He saw to the ship, fretting over each and every mechanical and electronic component like they were his children.

"Anything serious?"

"A little damage to one of the MP-407 ECM systems, and strangely, to the secure radio set. I have men on it now, but we won't be able to send messages to *Kazan* until I get that fixed. Give me twenty minutes." He saluted and withdrew, more business to attend to.

Karpov looked at his Plexiglas status board. "Well, *Kazan* is right on top of those bastards. Why hasn't he fired?"

Gromyko looked to be no more than 16 nautical miles from *Takami*, and in fact, he was just about to enter the game. He had brought *Kazan* from its cruising station above the layer up to shallow depth, about 130 feet, suitable for missile launch. He slowed to 12 knots to prevent cavitation at that depth, wanting to remain as silent as possible, even if he was about to give away his position and fire.

Chernov, his Sonarman, then reported something odd, a sound, like that of a great kettle drum being struck, and a deep rumble that resolved to some very strange harmonics.

"Where?" said Gromyko, leaning over his station, and Chernov pointed out the location. "Here sir, about fifty nautical miles north of *Kirov's* position."

Gromyko listened to the recording of the sound Chernov had heard, his eyes narrowing and his aspect more resolved with each passing second. He had heard this before. Something was happening, and every sense warned him of danger. *Kirov* was at war…

"Admiral," he said to Volsky. "With your permission, I would like to engage and kill that ship."

"Permission granted," said Volsky. Then he inclined his head. "Can you kill it, Captain?"

Gromyko gave him a thin lipped smile.

He decided to send a distraction towards the Japanese ship to see if they were on their toes. He wanted to know the score when he went shallow, so he fired a Fizik 533 mm Torpedo to see what his quarry would do, internally counting the seconds that passed after he made that launch. Sure enough, the

Japanese reacted almost immediately, without ten seconds hesitation, Chernov reported the enemy ship had turned away from the torpedo, and they were putting on speed.

So they know I'm here, he thought. Either that or they have a very good sonar operator to locate the exact bearing of that torpedo launch so quickly. No. They must have made me long ago, so I'd better finish up here and be quick about getting somewhere else.

"Sir, passing through 140 feet…. 130 feet and leveling off. Running shallow."

"Very well," said the Matador. "Time to skewer the bull. Warm up six 3M-22s."

"Mister Gorban, signal *Kirov* and tell them I'm attacking *Takami*."

"Sir, I'm getting interference on the secure channel. I can't get a handshake."

"Very well, persist until you do. Are we ready Mister Belanov?"

"Aye sir, six 3M-22 Zircons hot and ready. The boat is running shallow at 12 knots."

"Range to target?"

"Sir, we're passing through eleven nautical miles."

Gromyko shrugged. "Barely enough air space for the missiles to get pointed the right way. Alright Belanov. Let's kill that ship. Fire all ready 3M-22s."

The missile firing warning sounded, the outer hatches opening ominously in the murky water. Then, with a wash of bubbles, the ship killers were up, rising like fast swimmers to the surface of the sea, then breaking out in a wild spray, sleek dolphins of doom. They streaked away, made a 15 point course adjustment, turned on their radar seekers, and began to burn toward the target like comets.

Chapter 36

Harada had received the contact report from his Sonarman, Koji Nakano, but was still scratching his head over it. Twenty minutes earlier, Nakano had reported a possible submarine, confidence high. As always in combat, it was something unexpected. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that one side or another might have a submarine out here. It could be a US sub, or even an

IJN boat.

"Where is it, Mister Nakano?"

"About 16 nautical miles slightly southeast of us."

Harada thought for a moment. "That helo off *Kongo* was coming in real low… Lieutenant Shiota, signal that helo and ask them to take a look at that position if they can get there soon." Harada knew that some of these old WWII subs could be fairly quiet, all diesel boats. You don't fool around with a sub in that close, and so he thought it best to get a helo on top of it.

"What's the range on those old torpedoes?" he asked Fukada.

"Which side? If it's a typical B series IJN boat, they'd have the Type 95, which could range out 9 to 12 klicks. That's the baby brother of the Long Lance."

"Sir," said Shiota. "*Kongo's* helo reports they can put down dipping sonar immediately."

"Good," said Harada. "That'll give us two sets of ears and we should be able to—"

"Con, sonar…. I think I can read this skunk. Contact speed is approximately 20 knots, and it's fairly deep. I'd put it just above the layer at around 400 feet."

Fukada gave Nakano a dismissive look. "Come on Lieutenant. Get the wax out of your ears. Test depth for subs of this era was no more than 300 feet, and not one of them could make that kind of speed submerged."

"Sorry sir, but that's what I'm reading."

"That can't be right." Fukada went over to the sonar station, as if to see for himself, though he knew nothing about that craft.

Harada did not like what he was hearing at all. His man Nakano was every bit as good as the equipment he was operating. "Lieutenant, Go active and see if you can nail this guy."

"Aye sir. Active sweep…. I have him… bearing 060, speed twenty, depth 420, on a heading of 260…. Getting data from *Kongo's* helo now as well…" Nakano looked up at the Captain, an unbelieving look in his eye. "Sir, we're getting a pattern match, but this doesn't make any sense. I'm reading *Yasen* Class. *Kongo* One confirms."

That hit Harada like a good left hook.

"What? *Yasen* Class?" That was the only moment he would cede to hesitation, then he was all business. In any situation like this, you stow your

assumptions and go with what your instruments were telling you. “Secure from active sonar,” he said, finally wondering just what was happening here. *Yasen* Class… That was the same class of the Russian boat that escaped after that scrap off the Kuriles. What if….

“Mister Fukada, with me please.”

His XO came over to where Harada waited near his chair. “Could this be that Russian boat that went missing off the Kuriles when the Yanks thought they sunk *Kirov?”*

Fukada took that in, then nodded. “The only other explanation is system malfunction.”

“Great Buddha… This situation is becoming a real bento box! Here we were about to spring a nice big surprise on Karpov, when he pulls one over on us!”

“Sir,” said Shiota, “I have Admiral Kita on the secure channel.”

“They picked up the data link and probably want to know what’s going on with that damn Russian sub.”

Harada began walking towards the comm station, one eye on the situation board, a digital screen that was displaying all known contacts and tracking events. Then he saw a bright white circle expanding northwest of *Kirov’s* position. There was a brilliant flash of light, and Captain instinctively knew what had happened. Karpov had thrown a nuke at them.

“*Doshitano!* What’s that crazy Russian doing?”

“Brace for shockwave!” said Fukada. “Recommend all systems move to EMCON status.”

“A little late for that,” said Harada. Then they felt the palpable wave in the atmosphere, the much dissipated shock wave passing the ship, and the moan of a lonesome wind. They were over 75 nautical miles from the position of the detonation, and so they didn’t expect any effects beyond that shock wave, or perhaps some EMP damage.

“This guy is a lunatic,” said Harada.

“No, he’s just damn smart,” said Fukada. “All our planes off the *Kaga* reported safe bomb delivery, we had over sixty GBU/53s inbound on those bastards. They were toast. It was only a matter of time.”

“So Karpov threw a nuke at them?”

“Obviously,” said Fukada. “There was no way he’d knock down even half of those Vampires, but if he positioned that blast right, he could take out

everything there on that northern attack axis. That's exactly what he did.

Ryoko Otani sounded off, reporting her system was experiencing difficulty. "Just got a hard flutter through the whole board," she said. "I thought we were going to lose power."

"Could be the EMP pulse," said Fukada.

They would not have any time to think about it, nor would they have solved the problem if they did. That flutter was not any part of the residual shock wave from that blast, which was very attenuated at that range; not even enough to roll the ship. Nor was it EMP effects. The ripple was a small temblor in time, or rather spacetime, as Einstein would have it. We didn't live in space, with time being nothing more than a contrived metric we superimposed on all our doings. We lived in spacetime, and Einstein had already showed us that it could be warped and bent by mass. It could also be broken and even shattered.

200 kilotons was not much compared to the larger explosive events that had battered spacetime. The Demon Volcano that had sent *Kirov* and his flotilla careening back through time to 1945 had power equivalent to 200 Megatons, a thousand times greater than Karpov's warhead. The same could be said for the massive eruption of Krakatoa that first brought *Takami* and crew to this time. So it was a relatively light tap on the fabric of spacetime, all things considered. Yet for *Kirov,* possessing some rather exotic materials lurking within her control rods, the effect was enough to phase the ship for the briefest moment for those aboard. For those stalking her, the ship would disappear from all their radar screens for over ten minutes before it reappeared.

"I've lost *Kirov*," said Otani. "The system is just guesstimating now." SPY-1 was only reporting the last known location of the contact, and drawing an expanding area around it that encompassed all possible locations where it might have moved as the seconds ticked off—their electronic 'farthest on.'

"Mister Nakano," said Harada. "Do you still have that sub?"

"Aye sir, but it's changing depth, climbing through 300 feet and reducing speed."

Harada didn't like the sound of that. Seconds later he heard what he had been fearing when his Sonarman called out: "Torpedo in the water! Bearing southeast, range 11 nautical miles and inbound on our position at 30 knots."

"Helm, come hard right to 270 and ahead full!"

“Aye sir. Coming to 270 and all ahead full.” Harada was turning and running away from the torpedo. His ship could make those 30 knots easily enough, and those fish would never catch him… Surely that Russian sub Captain had to know that….

“Damn! Why you sly son-of-a-bitch,” Harada breathed. “He wanted to see if we had a fix on him! He wanted me to do exactly what I just ordered, and now he knows we had him in red. He’s coming up to run shallow at missile firing depth. That’s one cagey sub driver. Alright people, get everything hot, and I mean everything. Charge the laser and stand up the SM-2 system. We’re about to have unfriendly visitors.”

Kazan had finished firing at 11:41, and the missile warning had shaken the bridge to tense alertness. They were coming, blistering fast, and only seconds away at this range of just under eleven nautical miles. The air defense system was on full automatic, the aft deck cells on the SM-2 were already firing. The first missiles out would have a ghost of a chance at getting those Zircons, and in the first group of four, two of them would get hits.

But not a single missile fired after that would find its target. The Vampires were so close that they could not achieve their top speed in this short timeframe, but they were still coming very fast. A second after those first two kills, the ship’s Phalanx guns were grinding away at the incoming missiles, and had perhaps a 35% chance of hitting something in this equation, but they were not good enough that day. The Zircon was just too fast.

Three seconds later, *Takami* showed the Vampires some leg. The ship deployed its Mk 182 Chaff in an attempt to seduce the sensors on the incoming missiles. That had no more than a 10% chance of success, and it failed. They heard the laser fire and saw the bright explosion off the aft port quarter when it hit. There were three vampires left.

The SM-2s were still firing, but the Vampires weren’t going to be stopped by a missile now, they were too damn close. The J/NOLQ-2 ECM defensive jammer was trying to fry their brains, and it spoofed one of the missiles, causing it to malfunction, but the other two came ramming home. One hit the fantail, and they were lucky there was no Seahawk there being armed and fueled for operations. It came in a little high, the explosion a bright fireball that was mostly an air burst. It was as if the missile scudded right off the deck when it hit.

The other Zircon was fast and true, and it plowed right into *Takami’s* gut,

achieving near 100% penetration. The explosion rocked the ship heavily, like a boxer being hit low. *Takami* rolled back through the black smoke, critically wounded. There was a flash on the bridge and then all systems went dark as the ship's power failed. Heavy smoke obscured everything and the fire alarms were going crazy. Almost all the fuel that Zircon could have used to run out hundreds of kilometers was now feeding that fire.

The entire engagement had taken just twelve seconds, and the ship would not survive that hit. The destroyer listed heavily to port, shipping water from the enormous hole in the hull. The eight shiny new SSMs they had taken on from *Omi* would never be fired, nor would Fukada ever get to take a poke at his enemy with that rail gun at long range. Harada knew it was now only a question of trying to save as much of his crew as he could. He turned to Fukada, looked him in the eye, and gave the order: "All hands, make ready to abandon ship!"

Admiral Yamamoto's Guardian Angel was out of the game.

* * *

"Admiral!" said Rodenko. "*Kazan* has launched missiles on *Takami!*"

"Show me." Karpov rushed over, almost too late for Rodenko to point out the radar contacts.

"It's about time," Karpov breathed.

"Look how close he was, inside eleven miles. That's an explosion, sir. They got at least one hit."

"Excellent!" Karpov stood up, smiling and looking for Fedorov. "So much for this Captain Harada's little game out here. Now he knows we mean business, if he even survived that. What did Gromyko throw at him?"

"Six Zircons," said Rodenko. "Damn, sir. They were so close."

"I think we can safely say that ship is dead. But what about these other bears out here north of *Takami?"*

Turkey 1 was still feeding them data, in spite of local interference as a residual effect of that nuke. They had seen three more contacts well north of *Takami,* effectively pegging the positions of *Kirishima, Kongo* and *Atago*. It was *Takami* three times over, and behind them there was still Admiral Kita with the carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi,* and that still left both the destroyer *Takao* and DDH *Kurama* in reserve.

“Looks like three more destroyers,” said Rodenko. These first two are reading *Kongo* Class.”

“You’ve got sensor emissions from them?”

“Aye sir. They’re modern ships. Look here’ sir. That’s a Seahawk returning to one of those destroyers.”

“Range to this contact? What is it designated… Brownbear?”

“Yes sir, Brownbear is at 120 nautical miles.”

“I see… Well Gromyko has fired and he’s probably running deep and sprinting to a new position by now. We can’t let him have all the fun, can we? Mister Samsonov. Key up four Moskit-II missiles and put them on Brownbear—low attack profile. Let’s see just how good that old *Kongo* Class is.”

Karpov had gone through the insanity of having to deploy a nuclear warhead, seeing Fedorov vanish and reappear before his very eyes as the ship phased in time, and still he was all business as usual, wanting to take advantage of any opportunity he could find. He seemed completely unshakable, for in truth, after having endured everything he had experienced in this long saga, he *was* unshakable, and this was a borscht he knew how to cook so very well. He wanted to keep fighting, even as Fedorov shook his head in amazement.

Seconds later, the four missiles were away, surging out 28 miles before they made a fifteen point turn to redirect at their target. The closed the range through the fifty mile mark, completely unseen. They closed through the 30 mile mark, rapidly nearing their target’s far horizon. They were running at 1,450 knots, 60 feet above the sea, each with a 320kg warhead.

At 20 nautical miles out, they crossed that horizon, and *Kirishima’s* radars picked them up for the first time. Captain Kenji Namura was shaken by the sudden alert, but reacted quickly, ordering offensive ECM and a full response from his SAM system. He was carrying 54 RIM-161 Standard Missile 2s, every bit as good as those that had been carried by *Takami*. Standard procedure would see two missiles assigned to each incoming Vampire, and out they went. It would take six to do the job, but they would get all four of those Sunburns.

Aboard *Kirov,* Samsonov turned and gave Karpov a sheepish look. “Strike failed,” he said. “All missiles destroyed by enemy SAM defense.

Karpov nodded gravely. He considered running due north, hoping he

could find that carrier before they could turn over those strike planes. To do that he would have to fight all three of those other destroyers… "Secure from offensive combat. The ship will come to 180 and increase to all ahead flank. Mister Nikolin, signal Turkey-1 to stay outside 50 nautical miles of that contact and begin a return path south. Have the Helo Deck ready the next available helicopter for operations, maritime surveillance loadout."

Fedorov came over, looking at Karpov with questioning eyes. "We're breaking off?"

"That is the wisest course for now. I tested that *Kongo* class destroyer, but they were ready. Look now," he pointed to the Plexiglas screen. "They have two of those, and there's one more bear in the woods over to the east. That's probably another destroyer as well. You figure out how they got all these ships here, Fedorov, and I'll figure out how we deal with them. We have between four and six hours before they can rearm and fuel those F-35's, then we could be facing another air strike. So I don't intend to waste any more missiles on those destroyers. We'll move south. That's what Gromyko is doing too, running fast and deep. He knows they'll get up off the mat and start getting helicopters up soon, and that carrier they have up north is going to want a pound of flesh for what we did to *Takami*. As soon as we get the comms up, I want Gromyko to reverse course and see if he can find that carrier. "

"Damn," said Fedorov. "We've a real headache now. Cleansing this time line isn't going to be as easy as we thought. How do we deal with all those ships? Are you sure we should retire now?"

"Retire? We're just redeploying. I'm going to use one more weapon we have in our arsenal."

"What? You mean you're planning to use another nuke?"

"Now don't get ahead of yourself," said Karpov. "Those warheads are very dangerous, to us and any enemy I target. No, I'll keep those weapons tight for now, unless I'm forced to deploy again. We were caught by surprise with that F-35 attack. I did the only expedient thing, but for now, we'll use a much simpler weapon—speed."

"You want to outrun them?"

"I can't quite do that, as they can match us knot for knot, but we're over 110 nautical miles ahead of them now, and I want to keep that interval as wide as possible. Look here…. Their carrier hasn't been spotted by Turkey-1

yet, and this line here is indicating its radar coverage. That's over 180 nautical miles from us now. So let's say that carrier is at least 200 miles out; maybe more. I want to open that range as far as possible while they're rearming. If they don't turn now and pursue immediately, that's exactly what I can do. It's the carrier I need to worry about now, not those three destroyers. We still have 33 SSMs of various types. *Kazan* has 26 more. That gives us fewer than 60 ways to hurt them with missiles, but I have one weapon in my quiver that they don't have. *Kazan* has it too."

"What?" asked Fedorov, his eyes wide. He was thinking Karpov had something else tucked away in his larders that he never knew about. After all, he was still 70% a Navigator, and 30% *Starpom*. He didn't really know how to fight the ship in modern combat like this, any more than he had known how to do battle against the men of this era when he was first put in command by Admiral Volsky.

"Mister Fedorov, we have a nuclear reactor—unlimited fuel, and I can run all day and night, as long as Dobrynin and Biko can hold things together. Those Japanese ships out there use good old fashioned gas turbines, and they burn a lot of fuel if they run up over 30 knots." He smiled. "Understand now?"

Fedorov understood.

If these unexpected Samurai wanted to stay in the chase and keep after him, they were going to have to match his speed and endurance to do so. He was going to run them ragged, force them to burn that valuable fuel. Once they ran low, he would have yet one more advantage in the battles still waiting to be fought. He would have speed….

He looked at Karpov with renewed respect. Yes, it was true, he was headstrong, full of himself, devious and sly, but he was a fighter, a survivor, and every man aboard was still there breathing only because he had the will and nerve to do what he had just done here in this engagement, and the skill —with just a little help from Mother Time.

* * *

Aboard the carrier *Kaga*, Admiral Kita took the news concerning *Takami* very hard. He turned to Captain Jenzu, his arms folded, eyes serious. "This is more than we bargained for," he said. "They have a submarine."

“Aye sir. If that helo off *Kongo* had been up with an ASW loadout, we might have jumped on it when *Takami* picked it up. *Yasen* Class. They said they thought it might be that Russian sub that also went missing in the Kuriles—*Kazan*.”

“Well that complicates things, doesn’t it,” said Kita. “The Russians have given us the slip. We can see their helicopter, and it’s heading south, but it was *Takami’s* helo and that had a leash on *Kirov* for us, and we’ve lost that contact.”

“They’re down there, sir. We know where they were before they slipped off. We still have four birds ready to fly on *Akagi*. Two have GBU/53s, and the other two have the JSOW. There’s a fighter up on our flight deck ready to go right now. We could send it up for recon.”

“The fighter may be a good idea, but I think it wise to hold the strike planes on *Akagi* at the moment.”

“But sir, it will be nearly five hours before we have our planes ready again.”

“That’s why we should wait. If we hit them again, I want to use every strike plane we still have. We’ll run that recon sortie as you suggest, but we have to think about ASW operations now as well, and we may have good men in the water out there. I’m hoping a lot of *Takami’s* crew got safely off that ship.”

“Aye sir, we all are. What are your orders?”

Kita thought for a moment. “We move to *Takami’s* last known position. Get the Merlins ready for at-sea rescue operations. All the Seahawks get ASW loadouts. They caught us by surprise with that damn sub. Harada didn’t know it was there until it was right on top of him.”

“We need to even the score, sir,” said Jenzu.

“Damn right,” said Kita. “We’re going to get after those devils, nukes and all. Make it so.”

The hunt for *Kirov* was on.

The Saga Continues…

Season four continues with ***Stormtide Rising***
Book 29 in the Kirov Series

With the Allied forces closing on Tunisia from two sides, the Germans conceive a bold new plan that sends Rommel west to the heartland of Tunisia where he confronts the American Army under General Patton. The Axis forces launch *Operation Sturmflut* (Stormtide) as the famous names etched in the original history at Kasserine, Faid, Gafsa and El Guettar will again see the rising tide of war. Meanwhile, Hitler presses his daring invasion of Iraq and Syria in *Operation Phoenix*, while launching the cream of his airborne troops against the British outpost on Crete with a much belated *Operation Merkur*. As the action unfolds, Elena Fairchild's exploration of Saint Michael's Cave leads to a most unexpected place.

In the Pacific, the hunter becomes the hunted as *Kirov* moves south into dangerous waters and is pursued by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Admiral Kita joins the chase, and their tense naval duel continues, both on and under the sea.

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie "The Final Countdown" which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to episodes in the never ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship's position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon*, then continues the saga in *Altered States*, which begins the second "Season" in the series, extending through Volume 16. The series is presently in Season 4, covering the Allied offensives in North Africa, and the winter battles of late 1942. Boldly enters the crucial year of 1943 in Book 27, aptly titled "1943."

How to Read the Kirov Series

The best entry point is obviously Book I, *Kirov*, where you will meet all the main characters in the series and learn their inner motivations. The series itself, however, is structured in "seasons" with 8 books in each season. In Season 1, the first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. Book 4, *Men Of War* stands as a sequel to that trilogy and the bridge novel that links it to the second segment of Season 1, beginning with *9 Days Falling*.

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans books 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war in 2021 as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as *Kirov* faces down the US in two eras. Several subplots are also launched that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021, and deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The season ends at

another crucial point in history where the ship's Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events, the season finale, *Armageddon*.

Season 2 begins with the *Altered States* trilogy, where *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. It is here that a sequential alternate history retelling of WWII begins that will extend to the war's conclusion in 1945. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has powerful new ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov's* earlier actions.

The *Altered States* saga spans books 9 through 16, initially covering the German attack on the carrier *Glorious*, the British raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power, and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship battles!)

The second half of Season 2 begins with *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive, Operation Sonnenblume. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

Book 14, *Hammer of God*, covers a surprise German airborne attack, and the British campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom*, the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

Book 16 is the Season 2 finale, *Paradox Hour*, where the ship faces the prospect of annihilation on the day it first arrived in the past, 28 July, 1941.

This impending event overshadows all else as *Kirov* joins Tovey in a pursuit of *Hindenburg* and Bismarck as they break out into the Atlantic.

Season 3 then begins with Book 17, *Doppelganger*, where the aftereffects of the Paradox are finally sorted out. Fedorov is strangely displaced, and appears on the newly arrived ship, while Vladimir Karpov survives in Siberia, even as another version of himself defies paradox and appears on *Kirov*. Now Fedorov struggles to prevent the same dominoes from falling and keep the ship from engaging the Royal Navy as it did in Book 1. At the same time, the Siberian Karpov plots to seize control of the ship, and that action invariably involves Ivan Volkov, who has his own plans to strike at Ilanskiy in *Nemesis*.

The war then heats up on the East Front as the Germans launch Operation Typhoon, reaching a dramatic event on the outskirts of Moscow in Book 19, *Winter Storm.* These actions continue through *Tide of Fortune*, as Japan enters the war at Pearl Harbor, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The action then depicts the Japanese Malayan Campaign and the battle for Singapore, naval actions off Java and the invasion of the barrier islands, and then Operation FS, leading to battles in the Coral Sea and of the Fiji Island group.

In *Knights Move,* Montgomery is brought in to try and save Singapore, and coordinate the defense of Java. In the West, as the Germans battle for Gran Canaria in Operation Condor, Admiral Raeder turns his fast raiders loose in Operation Rosselsprung, but the Germans find something far more than they ever expected in the deep South Atlantic.

Turning Point resolves the fast naval actions in the Canaries as the German raiders attempt to return to Casablanca with their mysterious prize of war. Meanwhile, the Japanese invasion of Java is interrupted by an event that threatens to change the balance in the Pacific. A most unusual challenger to the ship they call *Mizuchi* appears on the scene. Meanwhile, in the Western Desert, the British launch Operation Supercharge to try and push Rommel off his Gazala line and liberate Cyrenaica.

In *Steel Reign*, the Japanese offensive reaches its high water mark as Yamamoto launches Operation FS in a bold attempt to storm the Islands of Fiji and Samoa and isolate Australia. He is opposed by a determined stand made by Admirals Fletcher and Halsey in the desperate battles of the Coral

Sea and Koro Sea to decide the fate of Empires. Meanwhile Vladimir Karpov continues his long planned invasion of Sakhalin Island, but Japan now has a powerful new champion as the Destroyer *Takami* is detached north to join Admiral Kurita's task force. The showdown is resolved in the season finale, *Second Front,* as the Allies storm ashore at Casablanca and Lisbon in September of 1942.

The series continues in the premiere of Season Four: *Tigers East,* where Rommel regains his lost glory in the deserts of Libya while Patton drives east in an attempt to enfilade Von Arnim's defense in Algeria. Manstein takes his hammer east as well to Volgograd, where the grueling fight for the city begins in *Thor's Anvil.* As the new year of 1943 dawns, the Allies now begin their war in earnest, and the outcome of the battles looming ahead will decide the course of the war.

Book 27, *1943* starts the critical middle year of the war as the action moves to the Pacific. The U.S. goes on the offensive, mounting a major push on Fiji, and amphibious landing by Halsey at Efate and MacArthur at Noumea. Carriers clash and the Japanese rush new hybrid ships into battle as the first of the new Essex Class carriers arrive to redress the balance on the US side. Then Japan's secret weapon, the destroyer Takami, receives an unexpected order to return to Yokohama, but the journey there will open a door to new opportunities.

In Book 28, *Lions at Dawn*, the war moves back to North Africa, where Eisenhower, Montgomery, Patton and the Air Marshalls plan their drive on Tunis. General Patton has ideas of his own, and they do not involve waiting for Monty to fight his way along the Algerian coast. His plan presents a major crisis for Kesselring and Von Arnim when Hitler orders the withdrawal of all Germany's elite paratroop units. The Führer has eyes on a new prize in the Middle East, and devises a daring return to that theater in Operation Phoenix. Meanwhile, General O'Connor's British 8th Army begins its big push to capture Tripoli, but he meets a determined and skillful defense by the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel.

An exploration of St. Michael's Cave at Gibraltar by Fairchild & Company leads to a hidden mystery beneath the Rock, and far to the east, the isolated atoll at Eniwetok receives some very unexpected visitors. The surprising developments set the destroyer *Takami* on a dangerous collision course with Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Gromyko, when the Russians set out

to cleanse the timeline of all contamination, including their own! Events lead to a dramatic battle at sea that neither side ever expected.

More to come!

Detailed information on the battles covered in each book, including battle maps, is available at www.writingshop.ws.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

1) Kirov
2) Cauldron of Fire
3) Pacific Storm
4) Men of War
5) Nine Days Falling
6) Fallen Angels
7) Devil's Garden
8) Armageddon – Season 1 Finale

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

9) Altered States
10) Darkest Hour
11) Hinge of Fate
12) Three Kings
13) Grand Alliance
14) Hammer of God
15) Crescendo of Doom
16) Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

17) Doppelganger
18) Nemesis
19) Winter Storm
20) Tide of Fortune
21) Knight's Move
22) Turning Point
23) Steel Reign
24) Second Front – Season 3 Finale

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 4: *Tigers East* (1942 – 1943)
25) Tigers East
26) Thor's Anvil
27) 1943
28) Lions at Dawn
29) Stormtide Rising
More to come!

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