

Kirov Saga



Season 3, Vol 8 in the Kirov Series

Second Front

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



YANK SECOND FRONT IN AFRICA IS OPENED

POWERFUL US ARMADA LANDS AS
BRITISH INVADE PORTUGAL



Harvester-Sandie Come
Dedicated to Soldiers



Kirov Saga:
Second Front

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

Karpov started it, beginning his own Second front against Japan when he first began stalking the *Kido Butai*. Now, with the arrival of the United States military in our tale, the real Second Front in the West is about to be opened. But first, we have unfinished business off Sakhalin Island. The battle that has been looming on our radar screens for some time is about to begin. That and other naval action in the Norwegian Sea will start us off, and then we will move to Operation Torch, which will cause dramatic changes in the West as the allies finally go on the offensive.

As 1942 proceeds, our intrepid Mister Fedorov realizes that the history they once lived through is being re-written, and he has concerns as they approach the time when Orlov made his fateful jump from that KA-226. After much deliberation, he thinks he sees another possible paradox looming, but realizes that he must have the cooperation of Karpov to do anything about it. The two of them put their heads together on this as we reach the final segments of this installment, and Fedorov has a plan. Yet he does not count on the whims of the Siberian, and things take a most unexpected turn that, among other things, will be complicated by a most unwelcome visitor in the skies over Siberia. Finally, we get to hear from a couple characters that have been missing from our tale since *Paradox Hour*—Pavel Kamenski and Ivan Gromyko.

There's a lot more action to come in Season 4. Should this line of history continue, the Allies must now fight their way into Algiers and Tunisia, while O'Connor and the British 8th Army must push Rommel from the other side. In the east, Manstein's offensive pushes to reach the Volga and link up with Volkov's Orenburg Federation, while Sergei Kirov, his very life at stake now, struggles to regroup and reequip the weary Soviet Army. That season will take us deep into 1943, and all the great military action as both sides finally match one another, and the outcome of the entire war rides in the balance.

For now, I hope you enjoy opening up that *Second Front*.

- John Schettler

Part I

Tiger by the Tail

*“A man who takes a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in
no other way.”*

— Mark Twain

Chapter 1

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 12:38

Now they reap the whirlwind, thought Fedorov. He had seen this all before, just after they manifested in this very year in the Pacific, when the Japanese raid on Darwin had first looked down to see a lone Allied cruiser running out to sea. Down they came, thinking to quickly dispatch the ship and get on with their mission. For *Kirov*, it was a sudden and unexpected shock, and they were fortunate that Karpov was on the bridge at that time, knowing exactly what defensive system to activate, and how to use it.

This time they get the surprise, he thought, but he was very wrong. The Japanese knew exactly what they were doing now. The pilots had been briefed, and told they would be looking for the mysterious ship that had been attacking the navy, *Mizuchi*. They were more than willing to try and find it, and also headstrong enough to think they could take hold of it like a cat by the tail and kill it. Yes, they expected a few scratches, knew that planes and men might be lost in any combat sortie they flew, but this was no ordinary cat.

Kirov was a lethal beast that was entirely beyond their comprehension, a tiger with claws that would soon rend their way through the sky with their slashing anger. They really had no idea what was about to hit them, thought Fedorov, feeling a spasm of guilt. Then he remembered how they came at the ship, engines wailing, the cold whistle of deadly bombs falling, the hiss of the defensive fire and the rattle of the 30mm chain guns on defense—and he remembered the battle bridge. One man had been so driven in a later attack, that he put his plane right into the ship. Had he aimed for the open deck, smashing into the missile armed vertical silos beneath it, the results could have been catastrophic.

“S-300 system ready sir,” said Samsonov.

Grilikov was sitting right next to him, his eyes narrowed as he watched the other man work on a bank of equipment that seemed entirely confounding. One thing caught his eye, the winking red lights, a bank of eight, and Samsonov had told him they each corresponded to a missile ready

for launch. The ship could have carried as many as 96 S-300s at one time, the missile the West called the SA-N-20 Gargoyle. It was an older system by 2021, replaced on most ships with the new S-400F system. In its second coming, this *Kirov* had a mix of missiles, some old, some new. There were 36 S-300s, as the Navy still had them and wanted to use them for the live fire exercises *Kirov* was to have conducted in the Norwegian Sea. A second bank carried the ship's current long range defense system, the S-400F.

Behind those, the ship possessed another formidable inner air defense shield, a missile of many names. It was the Kinzhal, or dagger, a variant of the land based Tor system that the West now called the SA-N-9 Gauntlet. The Russians also called it the Klinok—blade—and it was very sharp indeed. They were stored in clusters of 8, on rotary VLS modules. First introduced in 1989, this was a much improved version of that missile, with updated electronics and a much longer range, out to about 80 kilometers to move it from its roots as a short range missile to medium range defense. There were 128 of those missiles hidden beneath the decks.

The innermost defensive ring was the province of the Kashtan system, a short range missile that fired in conjunction with two 30mm Gatling guns that sat like the heavy black arms of a robot mounted beneath the missile tubes. This deadly combination could produce kill probabilities of over 95%, and it was further assisted by several single 30mm gun mounts elsewhere on the ship.

For anything to get through those three concentric circles of fighting steel would be a very daunting prospect, particularly a slow, easily tracked aircraft like those in the skies now. The 15 contacts to the west were Nakajima Ki-43 Fighter bombers, the Peregrine Falcon to the Japanese, but dubbed by the far less complimentary name of “Oscar” by the Americans. They were each carrying two 250kg bombs, a heavy payload of over 1100 pounds.

“Target speed at 230 knots,” said Rodenko. “These nine contacts to the south are slower, about 175 knots.”

“Most likely G4M medium bombers,” said Fedorov. “That’s a plane the Americans called the Betty, a level bomber, and not much of a threat in terms of accuracy. The others are probably land based fighter bombers. They’ll be the main threat here.”

“If you can call that a threat,” said Karpov.

Fedorov gave him a quick look, as if to remind him of what had happened

to them before. They were the only two men on the bridge that remembered that, as Orlov was below decks on his rounds that morning.

“Do we have the battle bridge manned?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Karpov, but that is no more than a formality for Air Alert One.

“Nice to know it’s there,” said Fedorov, again with a knowing glance the Admiral’s way.

Karpov gave him a flat grin. “Mister Samsonov, salvo of four S-300s. Target the group of fifteen planes and begin firing.”

“Aye sir.” Samsonov was only too eager to comply.

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 12:44

“Sir,” said Otani. “Sierra One has detected missile fire, bearing west towards Sakhalin. They must be firing at our land based aircraft.”

Takami had been watching and waiting, cruising silently in EMCON about 40 kilometers south of Kurita’s surface action group. They had deployed a single helo, Sierra One, low and slow at first so as not to arouse undue suspicion, and it was loitering at about 2000 feet, a hundred kilometers to the northwest.

“So much for that dangling left jab,” said Fukada. “Those have to be S-300s, or even the newer S-400s. We could warn those planes to disperse. It might give them a ghost of a chance out there.”

“We’d have to blab that in the clear, or relay it through Kurita on the secure comm link. Neither case would matter much. Those missiles are too damn fast. I’m afraid they were too quick to get up there. We’re still too far south to use our missiles, and the naval air strike isn’t even on our screens yet.”

“Trying to coordinate this in EMCON is going to be like herding cats,” said Otani.

“True, but the more we say in the way of any radio traffic, the more chances they have to intercept a signal that gets their attention.”

“Let’s just hope they don’t give our Sea King the same treatment when they finish off those planes,” said Fukada.

“I doubt they’ll target that. They have to think it’s a seaplane, just a lone slow contact to their southwest. It’s no threat unless it comes with in visual

range, and even then why would they care? Notice they haven't thrown anything at Kurita either. But they have a helo up too, and so they know he's there. Hell, they probably have us on the contact board as well, but as far as they are concerned we're just another surface ship of this era. So far they're acting as if they don't know a thing, which is how we need to keep it until we get inside 120 klicks."

"Then what?" said Fukada.

"Then we go active and throw everything we have at them."

"What about Kurita?"

"What about him? You know damn well that *Kirov* won't let him get anywhere close enough to use his main guns. As far as I'm concerned, it's as if those ships weren't even there. I think the Russians will take down any air threats, but probably make Kurita's surface action group a second priority target."

"And if they go after them with those Sunburns?"

"Then we have a choice to make. We have Kurita under our SM-2 umbrella. We could go active, get a fix on their missiles and fire."

"That gives up the game from that point on."

"Right," said Harada. "The other choice is to do nothing, let Kurita take one on the chin and see how much iron he has there. We keep on north, fast and quiet, and get as close as we can to those bastards before we fire."

"This is going to get ugly," said Fukada, "and real fast. This ship was built for defense. Our entire loadout is based on that. Yet here we sit, trying to creep up and get inside on these guys with one good right hand. You realize that after we throw that punch, we're done."

"So we have to hope we land it," said Harada. "After that, we could still use the SAMs in an anti-ship role. If nothing else it might keep them off balance."

"We should use the rail gun," Fukada folded his arms, eyeing the Captain. "We should use it the moment they put lead on any of Kurita's ships. We fire that while our Type-12s are outbound, and before we do that, we have to take down their helicopter. That's job one."

"Agreed," said Harada. "At least on the helo. As soon as we fire anything, the jig is up and we go to full active sensors. Then I'll put an SM-3 on their helo and take out their eyes. That way they won't pick up our SSMs until they get much closer. As for the rail gun, I'm not so sure it will do us any

good, but we might get lucky.”

“It has them in range right now,” said Fukada.

“Right, but we don’t even have a hard fix on their location with all our sensors passive like this. If we fire it now, we just give them something to chew on if they pick up incoming rounds on their radar.”

“They may see them, but they’re too fast for them to do anything about it. That gun fires at Mach 7!”

“Correct, but that will sure prickle their curiosity. No. The less they know, the better. I want to sit tight until we’re ready to take our shot. After that, anything goes.” He looked at Hideo Honjo now. “Lieutenant, crack your knuckles and warm up those hands. We’ll be busy with the SM-2s as soon as they figure out what’s happening.”

“Ready sir,” said Honjo. “We’ll knock down anything they throw our way.”

It was all cat and mouse at this point, only the question remained—which one was the mouse? *Kirov* was a very big cat to be sure, with very sharp claws and teeth. Taking that cat by the tail was going to be very dangerous, and Harada knew that Kurita’s two battleships and three heavy cruisers would be nothing more than secondary targets. They could contribute nothing at all to the offense here, which would have to be carried by any aircraft they could shepherd to the target. He looked at his watch, wondering what was holding up the naval air strike. It was a sallow and cold thing to think now, but they needed to put as many targets into the air as possible. *Kirov* was already going after the land based planes, and he was beginning to have a very bad feeling about this whole setup.

Just let me get close enough to get the first punch in, he thought. In modern naval combat, it was always the struggle to get off the first salvo that mattered. His missiles were much slower than those Sunburns, so he needed to fire first, before he had to go defensive. That would be the best they could do, get that salvo in the air before the Russians figured out what they were up against. All it would take is a single hit, on either side, to decisively shift the balance here. Harada was praying for all he was worth that *Takami* would be the one to get that first hit.

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 12:50

The battleship *Haruna* was in the number two position that morning, following in the wake of Kurita's old ship, the heavy cruiser *Mikuma*. As one of Japan's most modern ships, it even had radar installed, the Mark II, Model 1 Shipborne Air and Surface Search Radar, capable of seeing planes out to 90 kilometers, or ships at sea 18 kilometers away. Unfortunately, it was found to be useless that day, a clutter of static under the routine jamming *Kirov* was putting out on frequencies known to be used by the enemy at this time. Kurita's ships would have to rely on another system, a highly refined sensor that was directly connected to a fairly complex computer, more complex, in fact, than any computer aboard *Kirov* that day.

It was installed on every mainmast in the task force, carefully searching the distant horizons in every direction. That system had come to be designated by a most iconic name in modern navy circles—the Mark 1 Eyeball, dual mounted on a swiveling platform called a head, and the complex computer it was connected to was the brain of the watchman inside that head. That was all Kurita had, the watchful eyes on his mainmast, their binoculars, their brains. Everything else was jammed and down, but the trusty Mark 1 Eyeball would see a good deal more than any man expected that day.

They had closed to about 42 kilometers from the estimated position of their adversary, still well over the horizon, and unseen. But the morning sky was soon alive with the hot long contrails of the S-300s, one following another, scoring the mid-day sky. Heads turned, eyes saw, brains reacted and the shouts of alarm soon followed—*Rockets!*

That was the word Kurita had been waiting to hear, and now he rushed out onto the weather deck off the bridge to put his own Mark 1 Eyeball into operation. There they were, those long ghostly contrails in the sky, but they were not aiming for his ships. Instead they were moving west towards the dark mass of Karafuto, and their speed was amazing.

The planes they were after were well beyond his visual range, but seeing those missiles was enough. "Watchman! Report this sighting to the radio officer. Tell him to transmit it to *Takami*."

Kurita shook his head, a disdainful look on his face. Radars were useless. This cruiser was supposed to be scouting for the presence of the enemy here, but instead it was lagging well behind. How could it see anything there? I am told it has better radars than we have, but surely they could see nothing. Now we have the irony that my watchmen are the first to see and report contact

with the enemy—out there, somewhere. Let us see if we can find him today. I will be the first to see and fight this *Mizuchi*.

That was an honor he might want to shirk from if he could have taken the real measure of his enemy. But even so, it would not have stopped him from pressing on to attack. He had good ships here, fast, well armored, the best in the fleet. Rockets or no rockets, he was going to attack.

Some minutes passed, and then the watchmen called out yet another sighting, this time a bright fire high up in the sky, descending rapidly like a falling plane might, but much faster. It plummeted towards the sea, commanding the attention of Mark 1 Eyeball systems throughout the task force, and then, to their great amazement, it suddenly pulled out of that dive, leveled off, and came streaking in towards *Haruna*. Kurita watched, spellbound, seeing a naval rocket now aimed for his ship for the very first time.

The words of Admiral Yamamoto whispered at his ear: “...*they are fast, lethal, and have a very long range. They can strike your ships from well beyond the range of your battleships’ biggest guns, and well over the horizon—and from what we have seen, these rockets have deadly accuracy—they never miss their targets.*”

The alarm was sounding, a harsh claxon of warning. Men were rushing to their battle stations, soon manning their twin 25mm AA guns. Even if the men could ready those guns, swivel them toward the threat, sight and fire, the rounds would be traveling at 1126 feet per second, about the speed of sound. The Sunburns were moving at twice that speed on their low terminal approach, and the gunners wouldn’t get a single round anywhere near that missile before it thundered home.

The explosion rocked the ship, and though the side armor held, the fragmentation, shock and fire, were going to take out the secondary 127mm gun battery nearest to that hit, about 150 feet aft of the main conning tower and bridge. Kurita felt the sibilant rush of hot shrapnel rush past his ear, and he had come within half a foot of being killed at that moment. *Haruna* rocked, then righted herself, the ship now wreathed in heavy smoke. A hot fire was burning.

Now images of all he had seen aboard *Mutsu* returned to haunt him.... “*You will see them easily enough,*” the officer there had said to him. “*They claw the sky like Raiju, more terrible than the sky demon Itsumade. Yes, you*

will see them when they come, but there will be nothing you can do to stop them. Look how the fires consumed our ship!"

"Did you fire back at them?"

The man smiled. *"There was nothing to shoot at. We never saw the enemy ship—only these terrible rockets."*

"Then they are cowards if they refuse to face you in battle."

"That may be," the officer had told him, *"but here sits Mutsu, a burned wreck, and the enemy still commands the northern sea."*

"We shall see about that."

Kurita remembered how he put on an outward face of bravado, but now the smell of the charred metal on old *Mutsu* that had haunted him after that visit was the smell of the burning flesh of his own ship—a horrid, gasoline smell, as if an entire bunker of aviation fuel was burning, burning....

Chapter 2

"That was just a warning shot," said Karpov. "Strong advice that if they persist on this course they will get more of the same."

The four S-300s Samsonov had fired each caught a *Shotai* of enemy fighters, shattering those three plane formations and taking down seven of the 15 planes. Three more persisted, and he allowed them to come within range of the Kinzhal/Klinok system, putting a missile on each one to end the threat. The other five were wandering aimlessly off bearing, and it was deemed that they would pose no real threat. They eventually made it back to their base, with a tall tale to tell of fast moving dragons that devoured planes.

As for the nine Betty Bombers, two S-300s were used to break up that formation, downing three with their heavy fragmentation burst, and damaging three others. They had not heeded the advice to fly a dispersed approach pattern, their training to maintain a close formation becoming their undoing. The expenditure of six S-300s and three medium range Klinoks had therefore parried the dangling jab, and *Takami* was not yet ready to attempt a missile strike. Still unaware of the true nature of the enemy they were facing, Karpov then had Samsonov deliver a sharp punch to *Haruna*, a warning shot as he called it, with fire and steel.

"That won't stop them," said Fedorov.

"Perhaps not, but it will certainly get their attention. I will not tolerate any

interference from the Japanese Navy.” Karpov raised a finger as he spoke.

“Then you may have to deliver a much harder punch.”

“Easily done. At the moment, however, those ships do not appear to have the speed to close the range if I come about. Unfortunately, I have no desire to come about until this matter is concluded. We will hold this course, and deal with them if they persist. That’s the only way to assure they pose no threat to my transports further north. And just in case they have more land based aircraft forming up, I want the second KA-40 airborne and heading west towards Sakhalin immediately.”

“Aye sir, I’ll send down the order.”

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 13:15

“Kurita just took a hard blow,” said Otani. “Missile impact on lead formation ship.”

“We might have stopped that missile,” said Fukada.

“Yes,” said Harada, “but the next one would be headed our way, and we aren’t in position to fire.”

That was the real problem Harada faced. The U.S. Navy in the early 21st century was built like a very intricate puzzle. Each ship was a piece of that puzzle, and to see the real picture of the power it could project, one had to look at the task forces and battle groups that made up that segment. No single ship had ever been designed to operate alone, except perhaps the stealthy submarines carrying ICBMs. A typical US battlegroup would be centered on a single aircraft carrier, which was then accompanied by one or two AEGIS cruisers and three to five destroyers, with one or more attack subs patrolling as well.

DDG-180 was just one small piece of that puzzle, a ship that had been designed to operate with other vessels, and one that sang in the chorus of their combined voices at sea. *Takami* should have been at sea with at least one more AEGIS capable destroyer, several DE class destroyer escorts, and one of Japan’s DDH class helicopter destroyers, quietly being adapted to perform a strike role with the addition of the F-35 Lightning. The ship was never designed to make a solo performance.

In the modern American Navy, the carrier aircraft trumped the longer range of Russia’s excellent SSMs, able to strike with a wide array of air

delivered weapons from its planes. The best way to defeat those powerful Russian missiles was to see that they were never even launched by first destroying the ship that carried them. Here, in 1942, the air arm of Japan's offensive capability was orders of magnitude weaker. *Kirov* had just casually brushed aside the first wave of land based planes, and it would take considerably more aircraft to pose any real threat.

By herself, *Takami* had very limited offensive capability in those eight Type 12 SSMs, and to use them, the ship had to close inside 120 kilometers, which was well within the range of all the SSMs *Kirov* could deploy. To make matters worse, the Russian missiles were much faster. If *Kirov* got off the first salvo, *Takami* would have no choice but to go defensive, for even one hit would be fatal and doom the ship. Harada knew this, which is why he was hastening north now to get into missile range with some trepidation. He was going to rely on the cover and distraction provided by planes off *Kaga* and *Tosa*, and that alone was a dear coin to spend. Those planes would be flown by some of Japan's best pilots, a commodity that was precious and slow to ever be replaced. But where were they?

"This whole attack is mistimed," said Fukada. "We should have brought in the naval strike planes first."

"They were ordered to get airborne an hour ago, and we've finally got them on our screens to the west," said Harada. "How long before they get here?"

"Sir," said Otani. "Given their present cruising speed, I make it about 20 minutes before they have a visual on our position if they keep to the flight plan we sent them."

"Mister Ikida," Harada said to his navigator. "How close are we going to be in twenty minutes?"

"About 140 kilometers out sir."

"So we send those planes north and carry on. Let me know the instant we have the range on that bastard."

Taraika Bay, 20 kilometers south of Port Shikuka
20 May, 13:30

Kaga was the first of the two carriers to form up its strike squadrons and head east. Lieutenant Commander Kakuichi Hashiguchi was chief Air Officer

and Strike leader for this mission, and he had been very pleased with the new forward deck extension for the ship. Now his planes were well on their way, leaving the carriers behind where they cruised in the relatively safe waters of the Tatar Strait. They had crossed the long land mass of Sakhalin and were now over Taraika Bay, thinking to find the guide ship there as promised.

Though Harada had signaled Kurita that he was moving out of that bay into his wake, he just assumed he would have passed this information on to Admiral Kakuta commanding Carrier Division 2, but the word had not been passed. So when Hashiguchi's 15 B5Ns reached the bay, they saw nothing but clear open waters there. Patches of low clouds grazed over the sea, with light rain falling from their flanks. He searched for some minutes, then heaved a sigh and made a decision. They were to have turned northeast at this point, but the ship they were to pivot on was not there. So he turned northeast anyway, chattering on his short range radio to inform the other squadron commanders. Lieutenant Ogawa and Ibuki followed with their D3A dive bombers, and so common sense corrected for the error and kept the planes headed in the right direction. Behind them came another 30 planes off the *Tosa*, all D3As, a total of 60 aircraft in this first wave.

They soon crossed the narrow isthmus that framed out the eastern edge of the bay, and then they were over the Sea of Okhotsk. Lieutenant Otani had them on radar, informing Harada that they were off their assigned heading but still in the game. The Captain scratched his head, not wanting to send more encrypted HF traffic to Kurita and hope it might eventually reach those planes. So instead he took a low tech approach, ordering Hiroko Shiota at communications to find and use the standard radio frequency the Japanese should be on, and use Kana Code Morse to signal those planes.

It worked.

Otani was soon pleased to report they had turned fifteen points and assumed the proper heading, and with no suspicious signals emissions that might draw any undue interest from *Kirov*. So far the plan was still on track, in spite of the fact that the land based planes had moved to engage too early, failed to properly disperse, and paid the price for that.

His Sea King, Sierra One, was well to the northwest keeping an eye on *Kirov* by using passive sensors only. The second Sea King, Sierra Two, had also been launched and moved northeast of the enemy's presumed position. In this way, Harada hoped to bracket and frame the contact with overlapping

radars when he went active, nailing down its position quickly and then getting his missiles in the air as soon as possible. His hope was that *Kirov* would perceive no threat from those two airborne contacts, and he was correct.

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 13:45

“This contact here,” said Karpov. “It appears to be loitering.”

“A seaplane off that command ship. I tracked it heading north, and its hugging the coast, moving in and out of the coastal ranges.”

“It’s not a threat now,” said Karpov, “but I don’t want it heading up that coast line to observe our amphibious operations. If it gets 100 klicks north of our position, I want to know immediately.”

It was then that feeds from the KA-40 began to light up Rodenko’s screen. “More contacts sir, bearing 225 southwest, speed 180 knots. I’m reading it as a contact cluster at the moment, but experience tells me this is probably a full squadron of 12 to 15 planes. And there’s another cluster sir, right behind the first.”

“They must be coming from airfields near Poronaysk,” said Karpov, referring to the main port on the bay that the Japanese now called Shikuka. It was as good a guess as any, for the KA-40 could not see beyond Sakhalin island into the Tatar Strait, and so the presence of the 2nd Carrier Division remained unknown to them.

“Well they persist with this nonsense, and they’ll pay the same price the others did for that. Mister Samsonov, ready on the S-300 system. Salvo of eight missiles, two groups of four. Target the lead group Rodenko feeds you, and fire at 200 kilometers.”

Kurita Group, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 13:55

The timing of that little show was going to give Admiral Kurita a front row seat. Hashiguchi’s planes would be approaching his surface group from the south, using it as their second navigation aid. He had spent the last half hour receiving reports on the damage inflicted by that missile, and was pleased to see that the fires were finally being controlled. Yet his shiny new battleship had just endured the first scars of war. The secondary battery he

thought was lost soon reported that it could still function, and new crews were assigned. That didn't matter, as the ship would never get close enough to *Mizuchi* to fire its guns, but Kurita did not know that. The war would be fought well over his horizon now, and it was the province of planes and rockets....

And there they were, high in the sky again, arcing up and moving like sky demons, so terribly fast. His pulse leapt to think that his ship would soon come under attack again, but these rockets stayed high up, none diving to the water's edge as before. He craned his neck, watching them pass overhead, continuing south, where he could just make out the scattered formations of planes off Admiral Kakuta's carriers. Surely those rockets could never find and kill such nimble aircraft.

What he saw next was most disturbing, the sky suddenly blossoming with bright orange fireballs as the rockets swerved and fell on the planes. He saw two burning as they fell to the sea, and others swirling as if they thought to dog fight the rocket demons, but to no avail. One by one the rockets exploded, and more planes fell, nine in all, with three others turning away, most likely with damage that was forcing them to abort.

That would be the fate of Admiral Kakuta's planes that day, veteran pilots all. The long reach of the S-300s was going to find them well south of *Kirov's* position, giving Harada fits as he raced to get into firing position while that action was still underway. The first eight S-300s had ruined Hashiguchi's 15 torpedo planes. Another four behind them tore into the D3As, which were now scattering in all directions as per their orders should they encounter enemy rocket fire. That reaction was going to raise the stakes for Karpov, forcing him to push more valuable missile chips out onto the table of war if he wanted to take those planes down at range.

DDG-180, Takami, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 14:10

"Sir," said the Navigator, "we should have range on them now. I make our position at 110 klicks from presumed enemy position. If we go active, I can nail that down to the meter for you."

There it was, the moment of truth for Harada and *Takami*. He had eight archers with a single arrow each, and if he fired them now there wasn't anything but the rail gun behind them at this range. He doubted he would get

inside the range of his deck gun, and discarded that weapon in any case. The carrier based planes were already being engaged. It was now or never. He looked to Fukada, and Hideo Honjo at the CIC, and decided.

“This is it, gentlemen. Time to hit the dance floor. Lieutenant Otani, the ship will cease Silent Alpha and secure from EMCON. All radars will go active immediately. Lieutenant Shiota, signal both Sea Kings and order the same. Then advise Admiral Kurita that it might be best if he withdraws.”

Fukada was quick to repeat those orders, and soon the considerable power of the ship’s active radar was coming on line. The Sea Kings would go active as well, and feed their telemetry to *Takami*. In a matter of minutes their overlapping coverage would serve to pinpoint the location of *Kirov*. It was then that Harada played his ace, hoping it was good enough to take the hand.

“Mister Honjo, let’s throw some lightning—full salvo—all eight missiles.”

Claxons sounded, the missile warning hounding the nerves of the officers and crew, as it was designed to do. You never saw the enemy you were firing at, only the milky green phosphor of their presence as seen by electronic eyes. Yet you could see them in your mind’s eye, sitting before their technology, just as you were, watching, thinking, waiting.

The Vals and Kates off *Kaga* and *Tosa* were out there taking the heat from *Kirov*’s S-300s, but now eight fast arrows would lance out at the unseen enemy, and with them the fate of the campaign in the North Pacific would likely be written into this torn and shattered history that never should have been.

Chapter 3

Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 14:18

Rodenko was the first to feel the edge of the sensor shock wave when it lit up his board. He stared at the red light, blinked, his Mark 1 Eyeball seeing, yet not believing for that brief instant. Then he inclined his head, reached for a diagnostic switch, and nudged the system briefly to see that all was well. The judgment was in a few seconds later, and so he decided to report the mystery to command.

“Con... Very odd sir. I’m receiving a signal from the KA-226 indicating their *Ok* radar panel is being jammed.” That was the first indication that

something was amiss. *Takami*'s ECM systems were singing over the frequencies identified as active for the *Oko* Panel, and it had called home to report the offense.

"Jammed? Not possible," said Karpov, giving Fedorov a sideward glance. "How could they possibly have anything that could bother our systems?"

That was a short lived assertion, no matter how true it might have been at one time. After Krakatoa, the Japanese suddenly had plenty to bother a ship like *Kirov*, and now, to Rodenko's amazement, systems and electronic reflexes that had been idle for months suddenly perked up and began reporting an alarming train of information. Light after light began winking out new signals data, and the internal profiler was analyzing and reporting.

"What in God's name? Sir, I have emissions profiles on I/J band frequencies... Analyzing.... This is impossible. It's reading AN/SPG-62! And look here sir, we're getting S Band emissions and the system is profiling that traffic as AN/SPY-1D, and I have three other signatures."

"What are you saying?"

"This is crazy, sir, but That's the emission profile for an Aegis class destroyer or cruiser. We're being painted by long range target illumination radar!"

"An AEGIS destroyer? Nonsense. Here? Now?" Karpov looked at Fedorov. "Could we have shifted?" That was the first thing that came to his mind as his own internal systems sought to analyze and profile this impossible emissions traffic report. Clearly none of those emissions could be happening here in 1942, but the ship had a long history of pulsing—moving in time, and sometimes with little fanfare or sign that they had even shifted.

Fedorov looked around them, his eyes scanning the horizon, eyes narrowed, thinking. "Do we still have the helos?"

"Aye sir," said Rodenko. "The 226 is still being jammed, but the KA-40 we just launched is clear, and I have a good telemetry link. That has to be the feed on these signals emissions, and I'm making the contact right here, just south of that surface action group we hit."

"The goddamned command ship," said Karpov. "But it's clearly something much more. Fedorov? Sun and moon still where they should be? Anything amiss?"

"Not that I can see," said Fedorov. "We've still got a line out to both our helos, and that surface action group is still hot and strong on the board. So my

guess is that we haven't shifted."

"Rodenko," said Karpov. "Could our system be malfunctioning, reporting false positives?"

"I've run diagnostics. With one errant signal, I might take a second look, but I'm now picking up five separate radar systems, and the KA-40 is pretty sure what it has by the tail out there. Look here, sir." He read aloud now from his board data logger: "Bear 6 has been classified as DDG 180, Improved *Atago* Class. Admiral sir, this is an AEGIS equipped destroyer, *JS-Takami*, and the contact is hostile. Range, 80 nautical miles; bearing 180 true."

That was all it was going to take for Karpov. Mystery or no mystery, he was all business now. The impossible could wait for further analysis in the after action report. Something was out there, jamming a modern day *Oko* class radar set on the KA-40 and writing its name all over the microwave frequency spectrum. If this was a system error, he could call himself stupid later. Now was the time to act. If it was a an error, all he would lose were the missiles he fired now. Every instinct in his body tensed up and told him he should barrage that target with no less than ten missiles, and make them hot. The one strident protest within him that refused to believe this could be happening gave him brief pause, and he lowered the missile count.

"Rodenko! Activate all offensive and defensive ECM systems at once—Bell Bash, Bell Nip, Bell Thump, Wine Glass—light them up! Samsonov. Put the S-300 system on full automatic, weapons free on any missile contact reported. Then put four Moskit-IIs on that contact immediately!"

"Aye sir. Four missiles ready and targeting Bear 6 now."

"Fire!"

Kurita Group, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~14:20

Takami had put all eight Type-12 missiles in the air, but traveling at just under the speed of sound, they would only get half way to their targets before Karpov's anger found its way south on the hot tail fire of those four Moskit-IIs. Out on the weather deck of *Haruna*, Admiral Kurita had been watching the dizzy display of fireworks high up as *Kirov's* S-300s had leapt upon the incoming air strike. Now the watchman called out another sighting, and he looked to see more rocket trails, this time coming from the south! How could this be possible? Were there two enemy ships, another behind him? Then he

realized that these must be weapons fired from *Takami*, and that thought lifted his spirits.

He recalled his briefing with Admiral Yamamoto. “Scout well,” the Admiral had told him, “*and to aid that effort, I am attaching a very special ship to your task force, the cruiser Takami... a very secret ship, something entirely new. Do not think that the Siberians and Russians are the only ones who have developed this new rocket technology... it was designed as a fleet defense ship. Most of its rockets are meant to be used against enemy aircraft, or against the rocket weapons this Mizuchi flings at your ships.*”

Better late than never, thought Kurita. Those rockets must be trying to catch and kill the enemy rockets, but from what I can see, they move much too slow, and they are too low on the sea.

He watched them move in a stately trail one following another, eight in all, their tails bright with fire as they passed his ships and continued north. Then like a train coming in the opposite direction, he saw more missiles from the north, one, two, four in all. The two groups passed very near one another, yet had no argument.

They continued on about their deadly business, passing one another, with bigger fish to fry. It was then that Kurita realized these must be after exactly that—bigger fish. His own ship had already been targeted. Now *Takami* had fired eight rockets at the enemy, and four enemy arrows were moving swiftly away to the south, undoubtedly aimed at this secret new cruiser Yamamoto had told him about. These ships are fighting one another! *Mizuchi* hurls its fire at *Takami* this time, and it is terribly fast, much faster than our rockets. Yet how can they even see one another? My horizon is completely empty in all directions, except for those rockets. There is nothing on the sea at all. Is *Takami* simply firing blind? Surely it can have no idea where the enemy is now.

DDG-180, Takami, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~14:24

“Vampire! Vampire!” yelled Otani. “Multiple contacts inbound—I read four missiles. Range, 20 nautical miles and closing fast.”

“Hello,” said Harada. “Well, the interval of surprise is over, gentlemen. They obviously know enough now to get serious. Stand up the SM-2 system and engage those contacts. Set all laser and Phalanx systems to full

automatic, weapons free.”

Only four, he thought. I’d have doubled down on that salvo. But they have more in the cupboard than we do, and will likely fire again soon. For now we had better just hope we can stop those four vampires.

“Lieutenant Otani, what are we firing at?”

“SA-N-22B sir—Sunburns. We should be seeing them any minute now.”

Twenty nautical miles, thought Harada. That is too damn close. Now he waited, the tension mounting second by second as his forward deck was awash with defensive missile fire. The SM-2s would go out one by one, with two assigned to each target, and AEGIS carefully watching the results to retarget any missile to a new Vampire if needed. He saw something bright flash like lightning to the north, and realized the Laser system had already taken a shot. This was just too damn close for comfort.

“Call the tune, Lieutenant.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Otani’s voice carried the emotion of the moment, the adrenaline carefully controlled, the effect of all those many hours training at her station in drill after drill. This time the weapons were free, hot, and this was no drill.

“Laser Reports a Miss—recharging. SM-2 has locked on lead target and detonated. Splash Vampire 1! Wingmate is redirecting to new target... attempting to lock on... No good, sir. Wingmate has missed, but missile three has the target and is tracking true. Hit! Splash Vampire 2.”

They had fired eight SM-2s in defense, but they were not all needed. They had two misses, and four kills in the first six off the deck. The last two ran blind, saw nothing more to argue with, and self-destructed as programmed.

Battlecruiser Kirov, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 14:30

“They just took down all four of our SSMs,” said Samsonov with a sheepish look on his face. “I have no telemetry on any missile.”

That removed all uncertainty from Karpov’s mind. Whatever doubt that remained was crushed. All the puzzle pieces fit to paint a nice clear picture.

We got strange signals intelligence from Nikolin on HF transmission bands that could not be read. Something was capable of jamming our *Oko* Panels on the helos, and Rodenko’s contact profile tells me exactly what it is—a ship also capable of shooting down a Moskit-II moving at well over

Mach 2 on terminal approach. There was a modern day AEGIS class destroyer out there, and I have no doubt that we are now under attack.

There's no time to wonder how it could have happened, he thought. Perhaps it was just as Fedorov suggested when he gave me that quiet little warning. So if they are out there, and this is still 1942, then we had better get serious. If that ship went to active sensors, it was because he wanted to fix our position to fire. In fact, he probably fired some time ago, well before I let those Moskit-IIs go.

"Mister Samsonov," he said, his voice leaden, and deadly serious. "What is that ship carrying in the way of offensive missiles?"

"Sir, if it is standard loadout, it would have either eight Type-90 SSMs, or perhaps the newer Type-12."

"Weapon characteristics..."

"Sir, the Type 90 is a high subsonic cruise missile with low angle approach—a sea skimmer, sir. Range 150 kilometers, with a 225kg high explosive warhead. The Type 12 is similar, but with extended range. Both use inertial guidance systems and deploy active radar on terminal approach."

"Very well, please tell our S-300 system we'll be expecting bad company any minute now."

No sooner had Karpov said that when Rodenko's board sounded the alert. "Missile warning! I'm now reading eight contacts inbound at 20 nautical miles. Top Plate, Top Pair and Round House TACAN confirm. Range now 17 nautical miles and closing."

"Sir, S-300s firing now!" Samsonov would not have been quick enough to toggle and tap out orders for sixteen S-300s to get out after those missiles. The system on full automatic was far faster, and it was already doing its job. Hatches opened on the forward deck, and the long deadly missiles were up and on their way, one after another. On Rodenko's radar they fed out from the ship like a long string of pearls, but this time the targets would not be so easy to hit. *Kirov's* SAMs had been the terror of aircraft in this era, finding them without fail, their radar cross signatures simply too huge to miss, their speed so feeble that tracking and killing them was almost a certainty. This time, however, the targets were coming in very low, and relatively fast, with much smaller radar profiles, and all in an environment that was now suddenly alive with the harassment of ECM systems on both sides.

The first two S-300s were going to miss, but the third scored a hit, taking

down the lead SSM. The odds of a hit were about 80% against a modern day SSM like this, and now they were further reduced by the sleek target profile, its inherent stealth, and the environment in which the engagement was taking place. The once infallible killer was now a hit and miss defensive system, but then it knew that, and its computers had been programmed to dish out ordnance required to saturate the barrage with defensive missiles. S-300s continued to answer its call.

The fourth missile scored the second hit, and its three underdeck cell mates took out one more. The first eight missiles had scored three hits the first time through the lineup, a good day for a baseball team, but not for a ship when 225kg warheads were being thrown at your head. You had to get each and every one of those missiles, without fail, and so the system opened yet more cell hatches on that long forward deck, and let the S-300s fly. Twenty missiles would go out in this defensive volley, two each assigned to the two contacts Rodenko now could ID as helicopters, their radar signatures giving them away in the clutter of other incoming Japanese planes. The other sixteen missiles would all go after those incoming SSMs.

It was going to be very close. They took down three more, and the last two were now penetrating inside close defense circles. It was coming down to the last two missiles against two defensive SAMs, and those odds were not good.

Karpov had been watching the whole engagement play out on Rodenko's screen. "Get them," he said, his teeth clenching. "Get the damn bastards." He was slowly raising his hand, preparing to order Samsonov to switch to the Klinok system, where he had enough missiles to make those two intruders look like a porcupine when he was done with them. It would not be necessary.

Missiles 18 and 19 ran true, and each would log a kill that day. By the time they did, the sky south of the ship was a broil of contrails and explosive red orange roses as each S-300 detonated, either on an enemy missile, or by committing seppuku for the dishonor and shame of having missed its assigned target. The booming reports were heard far to the south by Kurita where he watched on the weather deck of *Haruna*. He was much closer to the action, but remained in doubt as to the outcome of the battle. Aboard *Takami*, however, they knew in with that last explosion that they had risked everything, and failed. They had stalked the tiger, achieved surprise, taken

Kirov by the tail, but now they were about to learn something they could learn in no other way.

Takami's SSM bays were empty.

Kirov's were still full.

Part II

Achilles & Hector

*“No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate.
And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it,
neither brave man nor coward, I tell you—
it’s born with us the day that we are born.”*

— The Iliad: Book 6, Hector

Chapter 4

Battlecruiser Kirov, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 14:36

“**How** many S-300s remain?” asked Karpov coolly.

“Sir,” said Samsonov, “I have three missiles in cell number eight. They will be the last for this ordnance.”

“What?” Karpov looked over at him, surprised. “Only three?”

“Sir, we have expended a total of 29 S-300s in all actions to date. Three remain, but we still have the S-400 cells completely full, with another 32 missiles.”

“S-400s?” Karpov looked at Fedorov now, lowering his voice. “What is this, Fedorov? The ship sailed with 64 S-300s. We only got the S-400s after we returned to Vladivostok.”

Fedorov had a concerned look on his face. “It seems something has changed,” he said sullenly.

“Changed? How very interesting. A nice little windfall, as the S-400 is a much better missile. In fact, we only took out the old S-300s the first time because the Navy was trying to get rid of that inventory. Our live fire exercises seemed a good way to use them. Well, I’ve certainly put them to better use here.”

He stopped, seeing that look on Fedorov’s face that he had come to know only too well. The two men were off by the Plexiglas situation board, where the positions of all the contacts were displayed in green and red symbols, updated in real time from information fed by the radar sets and processed by *Kirov*’s SA computer module. Situational Awareness was always the first order of business. You could not fight an enemy unless you first knew where he was, what he was, and by extension, what he was capable of.

The news that he now had 32 of the much more efficient S-400 missiles under deck was encouraging, but Fedorov had that look that spelled trouble. “What is wrong,” said Karpov. “You look like someone just told you your grandma died.”

“Something has changed,” said Fedorov, keeping his voice low. “You are correct sir, the first ship arrived here with 64 S-300s, but apparently not this

time—not in the second coming. Neither of us ever stopped to check on something like that. Everything on the ship seems as it was. In fact, You and Samsonov even discussed the missile inventory earlier, the S-300s. You told him you were pleased when he reported inventory on hand after each missile expended.”

“Yes... I recall that now.” Karpov turned. “Mister Samsonov, do you recall our earlier conversation regarding the S-300 Missile inventory?”

“Yes sir.”

“Didn’t you report the inventory at 61 missiles after those first expenditures?”

“Sir? I was reporting on the S-Class missile system as a whole, which can hold many different missile types, the S-300 base model, S-300F, S-300 FM, S-300-PMU-3C—which was redesignated the S-400.”

“Of course,” said Karpov. “As you were. Mister Rodenko, any further threats?”

“None sir. Nothing on my screens, though I’m getting some long range clutter from the southwest now. It looks like formations of aircraft.”

“Range?”

“140 nautical miles.”

“Time for that in a moment,” said Karpov, thinking. He gave Fedorov another glance. “Still worried about something?”

“Well,” said Fedorov. “That should not be the case—those S-400s. Something has clearly changed with this second coming, and that means that we caused it to change.”

“We caused it?”

“Who else? It had to be a consequence of our actions prior to July 28th of 1941, and that is a very disturbing thought.”

“Mister Fedorov, Russia is fragmented into three states, the Germans took Moscow, Gibraltar, Malta, and they are landing on the Canary Islands. You are worried about a variation concerning these 32 missiles?”

“Yes, sir. Those other things are certainly much more significant, but they are here, now, in this timeframe. That is a wave of consequence that is still underway and moving forward very slowly—in real time, if you will. But for a change to have migrated all the way forward to 2021 when this ship departed Vladivostok—that is something I find very alarming.”

“But it is only a few missiles.”

“At the moment.” He gave Karpov those dark, warning eyes. “Drop a stone in a pool of water, and the ripples migrate out. In the beginning the frequency is very tight, but as they progress, the wavelengths increase, and the intensity grows less over time, like a tsunami that sees its energy dissipate over great distances. I suppose I always expected that these changes would have to migrate forward, but I thought that the real consequences could be held here—until these events have run their course.”

“You’re saying that these events are already changing the future—and you did not expect this to happen now?”

“Not yet. Sir... As we approached Paradox Hour—July 28th, last year, things began to happen on the ship—some very strange things, as I have told you. I’ve given that a good deal of thought, and I think those events may be linked to changes that migrated forward in time. Men started to go missing, and now I think it was because something in the long chain of causality was broken—their life line annulled, and time could no longer justify their continued existence. Understand sir? When we change this present, we will also change the future—all the days between this moment and this ship’s point of departure in 2021. Those men may have vanished because they never even existed—just like the names on that list Volkov squeezed out of Zolkin, the men we lost in combat on the first ship. When we returned to Vladivostok, it was as if they never existed.”

“And you are thinking that if something like our missile inventory has changed....”

Fedorov nodded. “Let me put it to you this way... Suppose we change something here that has a catastrophic effect on the line of causality, so much so that time cannot account for our presence here any longer. Don’t you understand sir? The very fact that this ship was even built rests on a big stack of plates—WWII, its outcome, the post war alignments, the cold war. Suppose they never build this ship. Yes, we could do something here that would lead to that, and apparently the consequences of our actions here are already starting to reach 2021, small ripples at first, small changes, but there could be a tsunami out there, moving inexorably forward in time, and every missile we fire increases that energy. Look what we’re doing here at this very moment—dueling with an Aegis class destroyer in 1942!”

Karpov blinked, thinking. Then Rodenko reported again, and the Admiral inclined his head, listening, though his eyes were still locked on Fedorov.

“Sir, missile launch detected by MR-800 Flag radar system at 188 degrees, 60 nautical miles. They’re firing at our KA-40. It’s an SM-2.”

Now Karpov turned. “Not very sporting of them. Signal that helo to drop elevation at once, get them right down on the deck. Do we still have a fix with our other helo?”

“It’s being jammed, but I still have good confidence on the contact location.”

“Then it’s time we settled this. Mister Samsonov, Moskit II system. Set attack profile to extreme low altitude with evasion on final approach. Eight missiles please. Target the contact and fire when ready. Rodenko. How’s our KA-40?”

“Descending... Descending... They’re using ECM now sir... I think they’ve spoofed that missile.”

“Good. If they survive, have them climb again and reacquire the contact to help our missiles along. Now let’s see how they like our Sunburns.”

DDG-180, JS-Takami, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~14:40

“I’ve reacquired the KA-40,” said Otani. “They dropped elevation and hit our last missile with ECM.”

“Put one more on the damn thing,” said Harada. “Let’s keep them dancing.”

“Incoming!” said Otani. “J/OPS-28C has a missile at 20 nautical miles. SPY confirms, multiple contacts inbound.”

“Mister Honjo, weapons free. Knock them down.”

“Salvo of eight missiles this time—Sunburns.” Otani tagged the threat, and everyone on the bridge tensed up. They weren’t seeing these missiles until they broke the horizon at about 20 miles, which meant the Russians were also doing a number on their Sea King’s radar. Admiral Kurita had them in his binoculars at about the same time as they streaked past his position, one after another, a long train of potential destruction.

“That will make twelve in all,” said Fukada. “With what they threw at other targets earlier, this looks like they’re pushing all their chips out on one last number.”

He was wrong in that, for he was still assuming *Kirov* would have only 20 SSMs aboard, when in fact it left Severomorsk with three times that number.

In they came, and only Otani could see it playing out in real time. It was coming down to seconds now, not minutes. Soon the watch called out they had tail fire on the Mark 1 Eyeball. Then Harada gave an order that no one expected.

“Signal the Kurita group. Tell them that unless they hear from us in five minutes, we strongly advise they withdraw.”

Then the deck erupted with fire and the SM-2s leapt up, heading for their targets. “Vampires at 10 nautical miles,” said Otani. “Splash Vampire 1!”

They were firing the SM-2s in pairs again, assigning a lead missile and a wingmate to every Vampire. The theory was that a ship would always carry more SAMs than the number of SSMs the enemy might be packing.

In they came, and the sky suddenly lit up with more explosions, and every single one saw the crew breathing just a little easier. They got five more missiles, one after another, with Otani calling out each kill. It was now down to the final two Vampires and there were still six SN-2s in the air out after them. Harada had been looking over Otani’s shoulder, not realizing that his right hand had tightened to a fist and his nails were biting into the flesh of his palm. He took a deep breath, opening his hand. It was looking good. Then they heard the laser firing at just inside the seven mile range.

“Laser hit! Splash Vampire 7.”

The pair of SN-2s double teamed the last missile, and they took it down at the six mile range marker, the brilliant red-orange explosion vibrating the ship with the shock wave. The last four SM-2s ran blind and slit their throats about twelve miles out.

Battlecruiser Kirov, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~14:45

“Missile eight is gone,” said Samsonov. “Nothing got through, sir. They threw sixteen SM-2s at them.”

Karpov was not happy. “So now we see just how good the American tech is. Twelve fucking Moskit IIs, and not one gets through.” He stroked his chin, thinking.

“SSM inventory,” he said with a growl.

“Sir, we have 24 missiles on the Moskit II system, 10 MOS-III, and 6 on the P-900 system—40 missiles in all.”

Karpov looked at Fedorov now. “Nice of Mother Time to leave the MOS-

IIIs alone, eh Fedorov? At least nothing has changed on that count. They are quite a bit faster to the target. Let's see if they can catch lightning. Mister Samsonov, one MOS-III—just one please.”

“Ready sir.”

Karpov looked over. “Mister Grilikov, why don't you do the honors and fire this missile.”

Grilikov had been watching, somewhat dumbfounded at Samsonov's side. Now he blinked, looking at his teacher, who quietly moved his thumb to point to the correct switch, then he winked.

Grilikov fired.

The MOS III was a descendant of the P-800 Onyx missile and the work that was done on the Brahmos/Yakhont system for foreign export. The Russians were looking to compress the response time for the defender even more, and in the balance of stealth vs speed, they usually opted for speed. What they wanted was a hypersonic missile, and the first SSM to fill that bill was the Zircon 3M-22, and the 3M stood for MOS-III. That original design was first introduced in 2017, and was capable of speeds up to Mach 5, but the missile *Kirov* was carrying was an upgrade, the 3M-33, still called MOS-III by the rank and file.

It could run at Mach 7, faster than the hypersonic rounds of a rail gun, and now Karpov wanted to see if this enemy ship could defeat it. Counting time for acceleration, it was going to eat up about 2.4 kilometers per second. One missile went out, and closed the 62 nautical miles between the two ships in just 47 seconds. It was also stealthy, a sea skimmer, and it was not seen by *Takami* until it had penetrated the 20 nautical mile threshold.

“*Fast missile inbound!*” shouted Otani. “My God, it's running over Mach 7!”

That was fast, but there was one thing faster. The lightning reflexes of the modern day AEGIS system acquired the contact at 17.6 nautical miles. The fire order pulsed to the missile deck. And two SM-2s went out to challenge the intruder. Before they had even acquired their target, the MOS-III was just 10 miles out.... Six miles... The SM-2s had just tipped over and began accelerating towards the Vampire, but it was too fast, *too damn fast*... But one thing was faster.

It was *Takami*'s laser system pulsing out at the speed of light. Five miles out, the missile was struck. Its inertial guidance system was fried, a split

second later it was blind, with further damage to its steering that sent it careening wildly off course destroyed inside the four mile mark when it struck the sea, and then exploded. The two SM-2s streaked right over that spot in the sea, late to the party. They continued on for another 10 seconds, trying to decide what happened before they found no threats and self destructed.

It was as close a shave as one could get, but *Takami* survived.

Karpov watched the whole engagement on radar, pointing to the missile tracks Rodenko had on the defensive fire. “Those are the two missiles they fired? No others?”

“Just two sir, SM-2s.”

“Any malfunction reported on our missile?”

“No sir, the telemetry was clean until it went down.”

“Well now... This is very interesting. They must have hit that MOS-III with something else, but not a Phalanx gun. Look, our telemetry is cut off here, a little outside the range of their gun system.”

“Sir, I got an unusual emission during our Moskit II salvo, and I picked it up again just now. I think they have a laser defense system.”

“Yes... That would make sense. It’s the one thing faster than our missile, the *only* thing faster.” Karpov’s eyes narrowed. The junior officers watched him, wondering what he would do next. Would it be another barrage of Moskit IIs, or perhaps a heavier salvo of the hypersonic missile they had just fired. Lasers were a one shot, one kill system, and then they needed recharge time before they could fire again. Had there been four MOS-IIIs in that salvo....

Karpov turned, looked at Fedorov, then, to the surprise of everyone there, he walked slowly over to Nikolin, who sat up quickly, as if he had been caught doing something wrong. In fact, he had been quietly sending his friend Tasarov a stream of Morse Code that he channeled through his headset on an internal network, and the two of them had been wagering on which missile would score the first hit.

“Mister Nikolin, open a channel—in the clear please. Hail that ship by both hull number and name. Tell them Vladimir Karpov wishes to speak with their Captain.”

There were more things under Karpov’s deck than missiles. His mind was equally dangerous, and now he wanted to take the measure of his adversary

before he took this any further.

Chapter 5

DDG-180, JS-Takami, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 14:52

“Sir,” said Ensign Shiota. “I’m picking up a voice radio message—in the clear.”

“From who? Kurita? Well I suppose EMCON has gone to hell, but they have a secure radio set. Tell them to use it.”

“No sir. It’s that Russian ship sir. They’ve hailed us directly, and they want to talk with you.”

Harada looked over at his Executive Officer, a bemused look on his face. “In Japanese, or Russian?” he said with a grin.

“English sir.”

“Good enough, common ground most places in our time. Why not here? This ought to be interesting. Give it to me on the bridge overhead speaker.”

“Aye sir.”

Harada picked up the handset and spoke into the embedded speaker. “This is Captain Takechi Harada, Japanese Self-Defense Force. To whom am I speaking? Over.”

It was Nikolin’s voice, but the mind and words of Karpov. “Captain, this is Admiral Vladimir Karpov, Prime Minister and head of the Free Siberian State, speaking to you through an interpreter. Now, I don’t have the slightest idea how you and your ship got here, but then again, you are probably asking yourself the same thing about us. Am I correct? Over.”

“That pretty much sums up the situation, Admiral. I see that promotions come easy in the Russian Navy these days. Over.”

Karpov ignored the remark, and got right down to business. “Consider your situation, Captain. I counted eight missiles off your deck, and lo and behold they were aimed at my ship, but none of them hit. So you’re sitting across the table from me with an empty pistol. As you have just seen, that is not the case on this side of the argument. Now what in God’s name are you doing here fighting with the IJN?”

“Defending Japan.” Harada kept it real simple.

“I see... Well you may be broadly unaware of the situation here, but if

you were better versed, you would see that every action I have taken against Japan has been fully justified. Your country presently has troops on Siberian soil, and one of two things will happen—Japan will either withdraw those troops and return all occupied territories to Siberian sovereignty, or I will take them by force. We started with Kamchatka earlier this year, and now the order of the day is Sakhalin Island. You people have been calling it Karafuto, but that is about to change.”

“Perhaps so,” said Harada in return. “Then again perhaps not.”

“Captain, don’t play tough guy out here with me, believe me, you’ll regret it. Your presence here was quite a surprise, to say the least, but radar signatures don’t lie, and my reflexes are as good as they come. Now, I’m not stupid, and I know exactly what you just tried to pull here. It failed. You’ve expended your SSMs, and if you persist, you’ll be expending a good deal more of your SAMs as well.”

Fukada looked over at the Captain, his eyes wide, mouthing something which prompted Harada to pause. “Mister Fukada?”

“He’s bluffing! They just threw thirteen missiles at us and we knocked each and every one down. He’s empty too, or at most he may have but one or two missiles left.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Harada. “The first twelve were all Sunburns. But that last number was something new. Did you get a signature on it, Otani?”

“I thought it was an upgraded Onyx, but it was just too damn fast. Had to be something new—maybe a Zirkon variant—hypersonic, sir.”

“Well pinch me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think they load those missiles in sets of one. That has to be one egg from a full nest. I’m betting he’s not bragging here. He’s got more under his forward deck than we first thought.” But Harada had to play the game here, and see what this man really wanted.

“It seems to me that you’ve expended a good many SAMs as well—not to mention the thirteen flies we swatted down over here. Don’t get pushy, Admiral. As you have seen, we can defend ourselves.”

“Well that’s damn well what you’ll be doing then, because you’re done insofar as offense goes. You want to close the range and try that 127mm deck gun? We have one too, right on the bow—along with six more 152s on three twin turrets. Let me put it to you this way, Captain. You throw another missile at my helos and I’ll throw the kitchen sink at yours. As for that airborne contact just crossing over the eastern shore of Sakhalin about 60

nautical miles to our southwest, those planes are about to have a really bad day. Now you can either get on the radio and save some lives, or I'll take them apart, plane by plane, the instant they break through my 40 mile range circle. After that, I'll see if that surface action group 20 miles off your bow has any SM-2s. I don't think so. And when I'm done with them, I'll come south for you. It's either that, or you turn tail and withdraw. Your call, Captain. Vladimir Karpov, over and out."

Harada said nothing more, switching off the handset and returning it to its cradle. "Damned if we do, damned if we don't," he muttered. "Lieutenant Commander, what do you make of this?"

"He's right on one count, sir. We're sitting here with an empty pistol—except for one thing, the rail gun. We don't have to close on him to use that. We've had the range for the last thirty minutes."

"Yes, but something tells me that would be like poking a stick in a beehive. Mister Honjo, what's our SM-2 count looking like?"

"Thinning out, sir. We've got 13 forward and 23 more aft. 36 total on that system, and then we have the 12 SM-3s."

"Anyway you look at it," said Fukada, "we'll be an empty shell if he does have another batch of those hypersonic SSMS. Neither of the two SM-2s we fired were able to get a hard target lock before that last missile was in its terminal run. That's just not good enough. We would have to use the SM-3s, and hope to god we see them coming earlier. We can't let another of those hypersonic jobs get inside 20 klicks before we pick it up." Fukada had a hard face, but there was a crack in his bravado that Harada clearly perceived.

"If we do use the rail gun, and get any kind of a hit, bet on him throwing anything he has left," said Harada.

"I'm not so sure about that," said Fukada. "He's already put thirteen missiles on us, and with nothing to show for it. I'm willing to bet that's more ordnance than he's used in all other operations here, though that's a guess. We really have no idea how long he's been here. The point I'm making, sir, is that those missiles matter. That's his might and muscle here, and once it's gone, it's gone for good, just like our missiles."

"So you're suggesting we thumb our nose at this bastard just to get him to burn through his missile inventory?"

"We do that, and we've mission killed him, sir. He'll probably have his SAMs in good numbers, but there is no way he could really hurt the IJN after

that. So what I'm betting on is that he knows that as well."

"Explain."

"He can't expend all his ordnance trying to take us out, because if he does, he's basically just a fast anti-aircraft cruiser after that. In that event, we tell Yamamoto that he needs to hold his carriers in reserve, and then he can go after that bastard with his battleships. I don't think an S-300 SAM will put much of a dent in *Yamato*."

"Well that's real creative, Mister Fukada. You want me to provoke him into throwing a basket full of hypersonic missiles at us, just so we can spoil his party here. The only problem with that is we may not be here to give that friendly advice to Yamamoto." Harada thought, and then decided to raise the stakes. He reached for the handset again, and nodded for Shiota to broadcast.

"Now hear this, battlecruiser *Kirov*. This is the IJN, DDG-180, *Takami*—come back."

"*BCG Kirov receiving*," came the reply. "*Go ahead, Takami*."

"Captain Harada speaking, and you can tell your Admiral Karpov there that we're not going anywhere. If you've got the SSMs, we've got the SAMs, so bring it on. Once we pull your teeth, you won't be much more than a radar picket here, and that's as good as a K.I.A. as far as I'm concerned. JS-*Takami*, over and out."

Battlecruiser Kirov, Sea of Okhotsk, 20 May ~ 2:45

"Looks like they've called our bet," said Fedorov looking at the Admiral.

"Yes," said Karpov, "that seems to be the case, but I don't think it will take all 39 of our remaining SSMs to kill that ship."

"True, but if they do have the SAMs then we may have to expend a fairly good number to overcome their defense. They know that, and in true Japanese fashion, they are going to stand there and bar the door, come what may."

"You think they'll sacrifice their ship just to pull our teeth?"

"That sounds like their plan, sir. How many missiles can we afford to commit here?"

"As many as it takes." Karpov was angry now. "Those impudent little—"

"Con, radar, those airborne formations are coming up on our 40 mile range circle."

Karpov pinched his nose, chasing the headache that this entire situation had become. Every time he maneuvered himself to a position where he could make a decisive intervention, something happened to interfere with his plans. In August of 1941, on their first arrival, it had been Troyak and his Marines, just when he was ready to smash the Allied fleet. Back home in 2021, it had been the Demon Volcano, just when he was ready to finish off Captain Tanner and his vaunted carrier battlegroup. 1908 would have been a cake walk with Admiral Togo's antiquated fleet, but then along came *Kazan*, and Fedorov had everything to do with much of his frustration. Now, just as he was poised to break the Japanese Northern Fleet, here comes this challenger from his own day, unaccountably here, but as real as the missiles it was firing.

And when Karpov met with resistance, there was one sure response that he had demonstrated time and time again. He had tried to tell Fedorov he was a chastened and wiser man now, but some problems become nails that stubbornly refuse to be pulled from the beam. And when that happened, Karpov too often did the one thing that was both expedient and certain to resolve the situation in his favor.

He reached for a hammer.

"Damn annoying," said Karpov, looking at the updated position of the air contacts. The predictive plot line was indicating they would be in position to attack the ship in just 12 minutes. "Samsonov—two missiles, Klinok system. Give them a taste of what they'll get if they persist, and also let our uninvited guests to the south see that we mean what we say. Take down the lead incoming planes." He looked at Fedorov. "You know, I have half a mind to plop a special warhead right here," he pointed to the Plexiglass screen. "It would take out their surface action group, knock down all those planes and the EMP and shock wave would probably fry the electronics on that destroyer."

Fedorov's pulse quickened. There it was, Karpov's old reflex to escalate the situation when he was under stress. "Sir, a nuclear weapon? I hardly think that is warranted here."

"You heard that bastard. They're going to sit there and force me to run missile after missile at them. Our SSMs are valuable. I already regret the thirteen we've thrown away here. And who knows how many more it will take to get through their SAM defense? A special warhead would be so much

quicker. In fact, on a MOS-III it would get so close that it would probably take them out if we detonate before they try that laser again. It would end this here and now, leaving my SSM inventory strong enough to continue to apply pressure on the Japanese here in the north. Our first order of business will be to find the carriers these bothersome planes are coming from. That will teach them.”

Fedorov had to think quickly here, because knowing Karpov, he was just one order away from doing what he was suggesting. That would put the two of them head to head in a most uncomfortable way, as protocol held that the *Starpom* must repeat the Captain’s order, thereby giving his consent, in the deployment of any special warhead. Whether that mattered now with Karpov was debatable, but he needed to intervene here, and quickly.

“Sir... I understand your logic here, but it has one flaw.”

“Oh? Enlighten me, Mister Fedorov.”

“What you say is true. This action would preserve our SSM missile inventory, but for the expenditure of a special warhead? Would you trade that power for those 13 missiles we just fired? I certainly wouldn’t. Those warheads are decisive. Yes, they trump any enemy defense, in any situation we choose on a tactical level like this, but their real power lies in their application on the strategic level. Consider what the Americans did with theirs. They never once thought to develop this weapon for use on the tactical level. It was always a strategic blow they envisioned, and their target selection bears witness to that. Timed appropriately, in just the right situation, those warheads represent absolute power to change the course of events.”

Karpov pursed his lips. “Yes, I suppose that is true, but if I smash them here, take out these battleships and then find their carriers, I will have effectively broken the back of their Northern Fleet. It would then be impossible for them to interfere with our subsequent landings on Sakhalin.”

“Sir, I doubt they can do that as it stands. It won’t take much to mission kill that surface action group—just a handful of SSMs, or better yet, we could use the Vodopads. Torpedoes are a much better solution against those heavily armored battleships. Save the SSMs for the carriers, and it will only take one or two hits.”

“What about that destroyer? Do you think we can leave it to its devices here?”

“They have virtually no offensive capability now,” Fedorov said quickly.

“And they’ve already expended a good number of SAMs here on defense. That’s all they are now, just what they think they can turn us into—a radar picket with good AA defense. In my view, their real military power here is very limited now. In fact, I wouldn’t even waste anything further on them. Yet, if you must, I would think four MOS-IIIs might do the job. Their laser defense may get one of them, but my bet is that one gets through. That said, I would not give this ship the time of day here. They are not a threat to our operations, not even worth those four MOS-IIIs.”

Karpov waited, thinking, then raised an eyebrow. “Of course,” he said quietly. “I was only thinking out loud, Fedorov, nothing more. Mister Samsonov... I think its time we do make good on one of our promises. Take down that incoming air strike.”

Chapter 6

“Sir,” said Otani. “I have missile fire again. This time its directed at the air strike off *Kaga*. SA-N-92 Gauntlet type missiles are outbound now.”

“Range?”

“79 nautical miles.”

“We’d never hit them the SM-2,” said Fukada. “They’ll be on target before our missiles are even half way there.”

“A lot of good we’ve done here,” said Harada, somewhat dejected. “If we’re to defend the fleet, we’ll have to have all the eggs in our nest. With missiles as fast as these Russian SSMs, we can’t even protect Kurita—which reminds me. Have they turned?”

“No sir, they are still on a heading of 020 degrees north, and at 24 knots.”

“Well then we need to reinforce our suggestion and get them out of there. Otherwise this Karpov will do exactly what he bragged about a moment ago. Let’s face it, we need to withdraw. We’ve covered the landing of those troops, but this plan to take on that Russian battlecruiser had gone bust. It isn’t a question of us getting him now. It’s down to whether or not we can save ourselves.”

“What about the rail gun,” said Fukada, pointing to that weapons control station.

“What about it? Like I said earlier, all we would do is rile them up if we started taking pokes at them with that gun. I say we pull in our horns, make a graceful bow and get the hell out of here. If he continues south towards Hokkaido, then we’ll reconvene this discussion. But at least down south we’ve got more Japanese land based air power. It looks like they’ve called my bluff. We’re finished.”

“But we might at least get in a few licks, perhaps damage them.”

“Sour grapes,” said Harada. “No, mister Fukada, it’s weapons tight on the rail gun. That’s an order. And before you get your feathers ruffled about it, I want you to consider the fact that we’ve got just 36 SM-2s left. If we hand on in this scenario, we might have to use them all, and with a very uncertain outcome for this ship. Yet if we keep those arrows in our quiver, we’ve at least one card to play. It’s going to be a very long war....”

Fukada thought about that, and his own arguments to Yamamoto. He realized that Harada was correct. They had mismanaged their attack. Communications were in place, but the pilots off those carriers had trouble adapting to the last minute change of plans. They were late, and now they die out there alone, with our only consolation being the fact that the Russians have to expend ordnance to kill them. The Captain summed it up pretty good. All we are now is a candle in the wind of this war. Yet he's right about those 36 missiles. If we hold those, we might make a difference somewhere else, against the Americans. That's what we should have done in the first place. Why wouldn't Yamamoto listen to me?

He knew the answer to that the moment he asked himself the question. They appeared here in a daze, unbelieving, shocked by what had happened to them. Then they hatched this plan to get to Yamamoto. It did one good thing, he thought. It put us on the right side of this argument. We had to stand up for Japan, even if it meant we turned our backs on the allies that designed and built the technology we're using now. This ship is basically just a knock off for a *Burke Class Destroyer*, with a few more bells and whistles.

But look at us now. Our SSMs are gone, and 40% of our SAMs, and all we did was cost the other fellow 13 missiles. We walked into Yamamoto and Ugaki like we were demigods, miracle workers, with the ship that would turn the tide here in the Pacific. I suppose that's why Yamamoto set us loose up here. He knows that Russian ship, Siberian ship, is his real nemesis for the time being. It will take the Americans some time to get back on their feet after losing those two carriers in the Coral Sea.

So now we must make a shameful withdrawal here, and then explain all this to Yamamoto. That will be somewhat humbling, won't it? But at the moment, I don't see anything more we can do here. "Alright," he said aloud to the Captain. "I agree with your assessment. In fact, I argued it from the very first. Let's get out of here, before this Karpov tries our defense again."

Harada nodded. "Helm, come about. Make your heading 180 degrees south. Ensign Shiota, advise Admiral Kurita that we are redeploying south—don't use the word withdrawal or retreat. State that all air assets must return to the carriers immediately. Make it urgent. Send it to Kobayashi, and he'll deliver it to Kurita."

"I understand, sir."

When Kurita got that message read to him by the liaison officer, he

clenched his jaw. “Redeploy to the south? Why? The enemy is here—somewhere. We must be very close now.”

“Sir,” said the Lieutenant. “In order to properly defend the fleet against the missile weaponry you have witnessed in play here, it is imperative that we now form a unified battlegroup. We are too far north for *Takami* to adequately protect us.”

“Protect us? That is a cruiser! I am sitting on a battleship, and there is a second one off our port bow.”

“Sir, respectfully, that did not stop the rocket weapons that struck this ship earlier. And you witnessed many such weapons pass our position heading south. They were fired at *Takami*, and I am happy to report that each and every one of them was defeated by our own rockets. If, however, they had been directed at this task force....” He let a moment of silence underscore his message. Kobayashi was a bright young officer, and he had been selected because of his uncanny way with his seniors, who invariably came to admire him. He seemed to know every nuance of the culture and language, even with these men, ghosts from Japan’s distant past.

“Respectfully, sir, if we join with *Takami* as a single task force, then your ships can be shielded from harm, and your guns may then get their chance. Yet we must redeploy south, out of range of the enemy to consolidate. Captain Harada makes this urgent request, and begs you to come to a heading of 180 true south. As for the air strikes, he requests they should be recalled to *Kaga* and *Tosa* immediately, the planes were unable to time their arrival properly, and *Takami* remains too far south to defend them as they approach.”

Kurita stared at the man, the anger evident in his eyes. Yet he was no fool, and one thing was now perfectly clear to him, this ship—the *Takami*—was overmatched. Yes, the attack was not properly coordinated. This is what happens when I allow a Captain to dictate deployments here. I should have taken complete charge of this mission, as I was ordered by Admiral Yamamoto. Under these circumstances, however, it would be foolish to press on without support of all our remaining fleet assets, particularly the carriers. As reluctant as I am to do so, the best course would now be to regroup as this Captain suggests.

“Very well,” he said. “Signal *Takami* that we are redeploying south as requested, whereupon he will meet with me personally on this ship to explain

the incompetence that has put us in this position. That is all. Dismissed!”

* * *

When Karpov got the news that the enemy battleships had turned south, he smiled. Yes, he thought, I called their bluff and they folded. Now I savor the satisfaction that comes only to those who truly have power. This unexpected intruder is largely irrelevant. There is no sense wasting more missiles on it, let alone a special warhead. I’ll knock down those planes if they persist, then hasten this other surface action group along, and that alone will show this Captain Harada just how futile his situation is. That ship was never a match for *Kirov*, but then again, they knew that. This is why they tried to coordinate their surprise attack with these air strikes, but it was badly done.

We were Achilles here today, they were Hector, but lucky that I spare them. Now all of Troy lies before me for the taking. I’ve beaten the one champion they had with any chance of putting a dent in my armor. There is nothing they can do to stop me now, at least on the sea. The rest will be up to our troops on Sakhalin Island. If they do the job, then we will prevail.

I tested Fedorov just now to see how he might react to my proposal to use special warheads. While I expected resistance, I must say his analysis was quite sound. Even though he has been a lot of trouble in the past, he can be quite an asset now. He was completely correct in pointing out that while we are harboring tactical nukes in our magazines, their real power here lies in strategic application.

And there was one other thing that restrained me, even if he failed to mention it—the exotic effects of a nuclear detonation. I mustn’t forget that we still have Rod-25 aboard. From what I can gather in speaking with Fedorov, Time is rather warped and bruised here now. We must be very cautious about putting any more cracks in Fedorov’s mirror.

This other matter he brought up was also somewhat unsettling. He’s worried, as he always is, about the history, only this time there is something darker, more frightening in his manner than I ever perceived before. He is thinking our actions here are already starting to migrate forward, changing the history in the far future, in our time. He is worried that we will do something that will completely undermine the line of causality, and render

our position here null and void. That would be very inconvenient.

I like my position here. In fact, I have no intention of ever trying to return to 2021. I saw quite enough of that world, that war. This one I can manage. Here I am a god on the sea, and a real player in these events. Back there, I am just another sea Captain, just another target when the ballistic missiles start to fly. *‘If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.*

If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies . . .’ Words spoken by Achilles, he thought, and so I share his dilemma. Yet Fedorov may be on to something in his fear of tomorrow’s unfolding, and I must heed his warning.

When the engagement had settled down, his enemy turned south, Karpov gave orders to come about. Even the enemy planes turned to withdraw, and they only had to use those two Klinok missiles to discourage them.

That was not very Japanese of them, he thought, but someone must have ordered them to break off. Perhaps I will meet this ship again another day, but for now, I must speak with my *Starpom*.

“Mister Fedorov, a most satisfactory engagement. Yes?”

“Any engagement where the ship comes through without harm is a good one,” said Fedorov. “That said, we’re light a baker’s dozen under the forward deck.”

“Perhaps so, but they are far worse off, and largely irrelevant now.”

“Don’t discount them,” Fedorov cautioned. “That SPY-1D radar set is enough of a weapon to make a real difference here. Were they worth another dozen SSMs? I think not, but they remain a factor here, and a dangerous one.”

“I’m more concerned with this worry you have for the future. What is it, another threat from Paradox?”

“One was enough,” said Fedorov with a shrug.

“Yes... I faced it in a very harrowing hour aboard *Tunguska*, but as you can see, I prevailed, not Mother Time. That may sound like hubris, but here I stand, and she is still trying to figure out what to do about me—yes, I have no doubt. Then you see no paradox on our present course?”

“No, it isn’t that. The period we are in now is a kind of safe zone for the ship. We were never here before on the first ship. Remember? It was late August of 1941 when you did resort to a tactical nuke—”

“And I blew the ship into oblivion.”

“Correct.”

“Where in hell were we? I was in the brig, and did not see all that much. Believe me, it’s the last time that will ever happen.”

“The warhead, sir?”

“The damn brig! That aside, Volsky said the world went to hell.”

“Hell is a good way to describe it. I think it was a future that arose from our actions here, and it was very grim. Be glad you didn’t get a better look at it, but you remember what we saw in the Med before we shifted, Rome burned and blackened, Naples gone. Yes, it was hell.”

“But this period is safe? Explain.”

“We vanished in August of 1941, sailed through that broken future to the Med, and then reappeared a full year later, in August of 1942, right in the middle of Operation Pedestal. With Malta gone, that history isn’t likely to repeat, let alone the fact that we are still here in the Pacific. We never vanished last August like the first ship.”

“Should we fear that date, August of 1942? Might there be another paradox there?”

“No... I don’t think so. We stayed put this time, and never shifted, though I was more than a little concerned when you suggested we might use a special warhead earlier. You are well aware of the unexpected after effects of a nuclear detonation by now.”

“No argument there,” said Karpov. “Then you feared we might shift again if I had used such a weapon here.”

“Quite possibly. I would not want to be anywhere near a detonation like that. If I were you, I would reserve those warheads for the longest range missile we have, so the ship would be as far from the impact site as possible.”

Karpov nodded. “So then, if there’s no paradox to worry about come this August, what has you so spooked?”

“Just what I discussed with you earlier. We could do something, cause a change here that would knock out a key supporting beam holding up the future that built this ship. I’ve been thinking about that, and trying to discover what it could be, where the key event is that we must not disturb, and I think I may be on to something.”

“Tell me.”

“Think about it yourself, Admiral. I was the man who whispered in Sergei

Kirov's ear. Yes? My careless advice, and I suppose his inherent curiosity, led him to try that stairway again at Ilanskiy, and he ended up assassinating Josef Stalin. Hence we have the world we are sailing in."

"It wasn't all your doing," said Karpov. "I was largely responsible for the fact that we are now trying to throw the Japanese off Sakhalin Island. I'll say again that, had it not been for your interference—"

"Yes, yes, we've been over that," Fedorov interrupted.

"All I am saying is that there is plenty of blame to go around. I know what I did, and here I am, trying to set things right, take back the territories Russia lost as a result of that fiasco in 1908."

"Fine, but that still won't lift the burden from my shoulders. We still end up with the Orenburg Federation because of me."

"Ah, now I know why you are so glum. But was it really you, Fedorov? What were you doing there at Ilanskiy? You certainly had no idea that stairway had this amazing property. It was pure happenstance. In fact—why were you there?"

"I was looking for Orlov. You know what we planned."

"Of course I do. I was right there when you persuaded Volsky to let us take Rod-25 to the Primorskiy Engineering Center so you could shift back that way."

"You see? It was all my doing."

"I don't think so." Karpov was watching his reaction closely now. "No Fedorov, I don't think it was you at all. You have to look further back on that chain of causality you speak of. Pull on it a while, and just a few links down the line you come to someone else who had a good deal to do with all of this—Orlov."

Fedorov shook his head. "Kamenski said the same thing, but It wasn't Orlov at Ilanskiy, it was my fault there."

"Yes, but you were only there because Orlov jumped ship. Ever consider that? Our surly Chief of Operations didn't like his lot after our failed coup attempt—alright, after my failed mutiny the first time out. I'll admit the plan was mine, and I duped him into supporting me. So there he was, busted in rank, stuck with Troyak and the Marines, and so he just flat out deserted. Remember? You tried to stop him in the very first minutes you realized what he was doing. We put five S-300s in the air after him, but his life seems charmed. It was Orlov. Yes. He's the one that led you on that wild goose

chase to fetch him back, and that was how you came to Ilanskiy. When did he do that—jump ship like that?”

Fedorov thought hard.... “It was August of this year, 1942. We were still in the Med, running for Gibraltar, and we wanted a helo up to scout ahead.”

“Right, and Orlov wormed his way onto that helo, with the deliberate intention of abandoning ship. And here it is, 1942 again, and with August just a few months off. I think we might want to keep an eye on this version of Orlov as well, though he seems completely clueless as to anything that happened before.”

Fedorov’s eyes widened slightly, for he knew that was not the case. Orlov had just awakened. The bad dreams that had been plaguing his sleep had become real memories. Karpov didn’t know any of that yet, and something warned him not to speak of it here. And with that thought, he also ran the words of Director Kamenski through his recollection again:

“Nothing you did would have ever occurred if not for Karpov’s little rebellion, or Orlov’s strange letter. He is more than a little fish, I think, but Karpov is a free radical, a wildcard, an unaccountable force in all of this history we’ve been writing and re-writing. Everything that has happened, except perhaps that first explosion on the Orel, can be laid at Karpov’s feet...”

Interesting that Karpov failed to take his line of reasoning that one step further, thought Fedorov. Yes, everything can be laid at his feet, the first detonation that sent us to 1942 and Operation Pedestal was his doing. He led the ship through the hole in time caused by the Demon Volcano, and from there, it was again his doing that sent it to 1908. What he did there is still apparent here in this world. As for Orlov... He brought us Kinlan, and when I threw that thing he found overboard, who knows what else it may have done?

Part III

Fafnir

“It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him.”

— **J.R.R. Tolkien:** *The Hobbit*

Chapter 7

Orlov had taken to lurking about below decks, but it was inevitable that he would soon encounter Karpov. Fedorov had urged him to lay low, and to be very cautious about revealing anything he had remembered. The Chief was still simmering about it, lying in his bunk during off hours and running it all through in his mind, as if he was afraid the memories would slip away again, eluding his grasp, and plunging him into the dull unknowing self he had been before that fateful conversation with Fedorov.

He didn't understand it all—this strange business about the second coming, nor could he understand why he could remember these events, but no one else. Yet that was not entirely true. Doctor Zolkin had been feeling very strange since he had a similar conversation with Fedorov. At that time, just after the ship arrived in this impossible past, he had been bothered by oddities in his computer files, the names of missing men, and then that strange find in his cabinet, the place he kept mementos and other precious things.

It was that bloodied bandage that first brought on the odd inner feelings that he somehow knew what it was, and why it was there. Then Fedorov had come right out and explained it to him. Ever since that time, he had struggled to remember, and at night, he would sometimes have dreams like Orlov, seeing things that he knew he had not lived through when he awoke, but nonetheless feeling that they were, indeed, real lived events. He saw his old friend Leonid Volsky, sitting in a cot bed and lecturing Karpov, and then in another dream, he thought he and the Admiral had been trapped there in the sick bay, until Fedorov came, finally getting engineers to pry open the hatch. He thought it was probably just grief for his old friend. Zolkin had taken the news of Volsky's passing very hard.

The ears of Chief Dobrynin would also carry whispers from another world to him at times. He would be leaning back in his chair, listening to his reactor plant, hearing it as a kind of music, when suddenly there came an errant sound in the low woodwinds. He would incline his head, listening, hearing and feeling the sound at the same time, and just as a sudden smell

could be a powerful memory trigger for others, these sounds worked the same way for him. They meant something—very important—and by listening to them, he came to feel that he had heard such sounds once before, carefully controlling them himself, like a conductor directing his orchestra. Then they vanished, taking that powerful sense of recollection with them... until they came again.

Another man would also begin waking up, Isaak Nikolin. For him it was just something that would come to him while he was grinning over a message he received on his private little network from Tasarov. He had been laughing to himself over a joke the Sonarman had sent him, then, unaccountably, he had a strange feeling of sadness, terrible loss, and it had something to do with his friend. He could not shake it for some time, but it would gradually pass. The next morning at officer's mess he would look for Tasarov, asking him if he slept well and whether he felt alright.

"Of course," said Tasarov. "I'm fine. Just hungry for a little more than the same old breakfast once in a while."

Why the sadness, this sense of *Toska*, Nikolin wondered? There was Tasarov, fit and fine, and he had nothing to worry about on his account.

So it on would go, this odd simmering of another life slowly bubbling up in the crew, memories, dreams, feelings that they had done all this once, that *déjà vu* as Fedorov called it when he explained it to Orlov—the feeling that had enveloped him like the plume of bad French Cologne.

"Mister Orlov," said Karpov as he stepped off the ladder. There he found the Chief, who had been ready to take the ladder up when he saw someone coming down from above.

"Captain... I mean Admiral." Those were the only words the Chief could get out, for within, he was wrestling with the powerful memories of what Karpov had done, how he had goaded him, duped him into supporting his mutiny, and then how he seemed to gloat when the Chief was busted and sent down to the Marines, while Karpov wormed his way to the bridge again, just like he always did.

All these things were in his mind, and especially that one moment of satisfaction he took when he found Karpov in the officer's dining room, and then deliberately spilled coffee on him in front of some of the other men. He had then waited outside the door, until Karpov emerged. That was when he really got a little payback, and put his big fist into Karpov's belly, knocking

him breathless to the deck. Damn if he didn't have that same urge now, but the presence of Karpov here was eerie, different, like a darkness that had become animated, cold and calculating night.

"Something wrong, Chief?"

"Nothing," said Orlov, edging past Karpov in the narrow passage. "Just work on B deck again. I'll see to it."

Karpov nodded, but looked over his shoulder as the Chief started up the ladder, his eyes following him up. The man had an odd look on his face, he thought, white as a sheet. Maybe I'd better give him some leave. After all, rattling lockers and rousting men out of their bunks is thankless work. Orlov never comes up to the bridge these days, at least not on my rotations. Perhaps I best keep an eye on him. He turned, and strode off down the corridor.

At the top of the ladder, Orlov felt he could finally breathe. "Yes," he said softly to himself. "I'll see to it... I'll see to you as well."

His highness has written me off, hasn't he. Now he's got Grilikov up there, all chummy with Samsonov. What was I supposed to be, Some kind of Brigadier in his little mob here? Well, I have news for him, and maybe very soon. That scrawny little neck of his will feel very good in my nice big hands when I choke the life out of that man, just like I did the same to Commissar Molla. Those two are eggs from the same basket. There's only one way to break them, and when I break you, Admiral, you won't like it one bit.... no... not one bit....

* * *

Admiral Tovey stared at the strange box that held so many mysteries for them. If he believed Miss Fairchild, that box, and the key she used with it, brought her ship here to the 1940s. It was a very timely arrival, and the services of the *Argos Fire* had been invaluable to him. Now he had repaid Miss Fairchild in kind. The key that Fedorov had sent to him, the one he recovered from Admiral Volsky's remains, was a gift to her. Now, amazingly, she discovered this other odd thing about that box of hers. It had a hidden compartment, where impressions were made to receive these keys—seven in all. That thought was very alarming.

"Have a look for yourself," said Elena, a gleam in her eye.

"My," said Tovey. "One for each key..." He was looking at a series of

small imprints in the material making up the base of that drawer. There were seven, each depression in the shape of a key.

“My key fits very nicely here,” Elena pointed to the second recessed area. “I thought it might be in the number one position, but it only fits here, in the number two spot. I suspect all the others have a place here as well.”

“Why not see where our newest arrival fits in,” Tovey suggested.

Elena smiled. “Yes, why not?”

She took the key, hovering it over the impressions until she thought she saw one that seemed very close, the number four spot, but the fit was not good. One by one, she tried them all, until the last—the number one position.

“It looks like we’ve found our culprit,” said Tovey, watching as Elena slowly laid the key in the number one spot. It was a perfect fit.

“Interesting,” she said. “Here I thought I had the master key, but this one has trumped me. I wish I knew how Fedorov came by it, but it’s enough that we have it at all, thanks to Admiral Volsky.”

“And that was a very high price to pay for it,” said Tovey. “Now then... You tell me this ship arrived here after you used your key in that aperture in the box?”

“That’s how I understand it.”

“Then I wonder what might happen if we were to use this new key in that fashion?”

Elena flashed him a dark glance. “That would be very dangerous.”

“I suppose it would,” said Tovey. “Yet logic leads me to think that if one key moved this ship here, another might take it somewhere else.”

“Agreed, but I’m not sure I want to find out just now. I’ve a raid to look after.”

“Quite so. Yes, I think it best that we put that little experiment off for a time, perhaps until we’ve recovered more of the other missing keys. It could be that they are each just one number in a coded lock, if you follow me, each key moving a tumbler that’s part of a combination. What it might unlock is beyond my imagining., but I might put the question to our Mister Turing. He’s very good with puzzles and codes.”

Elena smiled. “We may never find the key we lost on *Rodney*.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that. Professor Dorland seemed a very determined man, and I daresay he’s got quite a nice little machine somewhere if he can come and go as he pleases.”

“Yes, that was another unexpected surprise in all of this.”

“Well, if he got himself here for that mission aboard *Rodney*, and then again for that conference in the Azores, could he go further back to find this key?”

“Possibly. That was discussed, but it’s beyond our control.”

“Well,” Tovey shrugged. “Our nest is filling out a bit, but it seems we still have quite a few missing eggs. The key on *Rodney* was embedded in the Selene Horse, and we’re told it is associated with St. Michael’s Cave under the Rock. You say one was in the Lindisfarne Gospels, and another in the Rosetta Stone, but you’ve no idea what they may be associated with. I’m tempted to go have a look at those artifacts—quietly. We might find further clues.”

“We might....” Elena said nothing more. “As to this raid, Admiral. When will you need *Argos Fire*?”

“On the night of the 14th of May. We wanted to go earlier, but now it’s the 14th.”

“Well, don’t worry Admiral. With my ship and crew on the watch, your raid on that dry-dock will come off without a hitch.”

“Until we meet again then,” Tovey extended a hand. “I will be in London soon, and see about the Rosetta Stone. In the meantime, if you could see to the *Normandie* dock gates at Saint Nazaire, we would be very grateful.”

* * *

That raid, the Great Raid, as it came to be called in Fedorov’s history, did go off without a hitch. *Argos Fire* had to use two RGM-84s obtained from the Funnies, and plenty of support from that accurate deck gun, but they took out the key shore batteries and smashed the searchlights. The helicopters suppressed the AA defense, slipped in with the Argonauts leading a team of British Commandos, and they fought their way into the facility to take out secondary targets. The *Campbeltown* made her appointment with those heavy locks, her nose laden with explosives. They got in, got out, and with very few casualties, no one captured by the enemy as had been the case in the old history.

So the *Hindenburg* did not reach its berth there, and was forced to turn about and withdraw to Gibraltar. There the divers set to work on that

damaged hull. It would take much longer, yet slowly but surely, that great dragon of the sea was getting new scales.

Frustrated and grumbling, Hitler would soon turn his attention to another dragon, one he never thought he would see in the skies over Germany again. It was Karpov's brazen overflight of the Reich that had put the idea in his mind, and now he would see the fruits of the orders he had given after that raid over Berlin. As for the Great Raid, he was so upset when he learned about it that he declared such operations illegal acts of war, and gave explicit orders that any enemy commando captured in another such raid was to be summarily executed on the spot.

He fretted and paced, unhappy with the latest reports that also indicated the Allies were planning some kind of new front in the West against him. Canaris seemed to downplay the rumors, but Himmler was a little more insistent.

As always, when things in the war did not go just as he liked, the Führer looked for solutions in the development of new weapons. Now he would go to the marshalling yards to see one, a most unusual development, or so he came to think, but one that could prove very useful.

Chapter 8

Hitler stood in the assembly yard, staring at the vast shape before him. On his left was Hermann Goering, with a staff adjutant, and on his right a technical advisor, there to explain the features and design breakthroughs that would make this weapon so formidable.

“And so you see, my Führer, the applied force resulting from firing the weapon must be balanced by the resulting static and inertial reactions that occur, and these forces must be equal and opposite. We have achieved this with the use of muzzle brakes to deflect the explosive gas when the gun fires, a highly lubricated recoil chamber, and precision hydraulics. The result is astounding. We have reduced the recoil effect to a point where it is barely noticeable, and far beneath the threshold where it might impact stability, pitch, or yaw of the firing platform where the gun is mounted. This will have immediate applications for this new project before you here, as well as naval guns. It will also allow us to mount this technology on vehicles as well, where stability is always a factor in overall performance and accuracy. Soon your tanks will not have to stop to have a good chance of hitting their targets. They will be able to fire on the move, and with much greater accuracy when we combine this with our new gyroscopic gun mounts.”

Hitler listened, nodding his approval, hands clasped behind his back as his eyes played over the gun before him. Yet always they were drawn back to the thing in the assembly yard, massive, looming, extending up the height of many men. This was but a single gun that would soon be mounted on it, a proven design, one of Germany's tried and true weapons of war. It had so many applications that had been well tested on the battlefield, a flak gun, a tank killer, and now it would be something more, the fearsome 88. This gun had been retooled with lightweight aluminum in every part possible. Stronger than steel, aluminum was much lighter, reducing the overall weight of the weapon from 7400 kilograms to just under 2000. This was important, for the hulking shape in the yard that commanded Hitler's attention was an airship, where every kilogram mattered when considering the lifting gas had to carry the dead weight of the structural frame, engines, fuel, oil, all weapons and ammunition, ballast, supplies, fixtures, and the crew itself.

“How many can be mounted?” asked the Führer.

“At the moment, we are considering four guns, one forward, one aft in the tail section, one in a rotating turret beneath the main gondola, and one on the top gun platform. This will give the ship a 360 degree engagement bubble, on both the vertical and horizontal axis. Even this was difficult to achieve, so we developed a lighter weight shell, sacrificing a little range and hitting power, but still giving us a weapon that can vastly outrange any gun presently mounted on an enemy airship.”

“Excellent. How far?”

“About 12,000 meters effective firing range. That is twice the maximum firing range of the best 105mm recoilless rifle.”

“But wont this shell simply pass right through the target? There is little armor on an enemy airship.”

“That is correct, but we have special HE rounds with fragmentation airburst effects. This entire system was tailor made for this project.”

“And the other guns?”

“The ship will mount sixteen Rheinmetall 7.5cm LG 40 recoilless rifles, with an effective firing range of 6,800 meters. That is the secondary battery. Then we add another eight Krupp 10.5cm LG 40s, with a range of 7,950 meters. The 88mm guns are the main battery for long range engagement of targets on the ground, sea or air.”

“They will not do much good against a battleship.”

“No. my Führer, not to the flotation of the ship, but considering that they have a fast rate of fire, 15 rounds per minute, they can cause considerable damage to the superstructure. That said, the airship was never designed to be a sea control weapon. It can serve ably as a high altitude naval reconnaissance platform, but its main virtue is in controlling the airspace over land.”

Now Goering took over, gesturing to the airship before them with his baton. “There will also be eight twin 20mm flak guns, and sixteen more MG-42 machineguns for defense against enemy aircraft—and all the guns have special lightweight alloys for the bulk of their structure and carriage. The trick is to minimize weight wherever possible. Notice the grilled racks at the lower portion of the gondolas,” he said. “Those are for mounting bombs, and the lighter we get the structure and weapons, the more this ship will carry. Look at it, my Führer. It will be the terror of the skies, a real height climber too, capable of reaching the dizzying heights of up to 50,000 feet. Our own

Bf-109 cannot even reach such altitudes, and it is the finest fighter in the world.”

“Good,” said Hitler, a light kindling in his eyes. “How big is it? How fast?”

“325meters long nose to tail, and with Six Daimler-Benz DB 800 engines that will produce speeds of up to 140kph; faster with a good tailwind. It will have 300,000 cubic meter capacity, three times that of the old *Graf Zeppelin*, and a third bigger than the old *Hindenburg*. It will be the largest airship in the world, bigger than anything the Siberians have built, or anything presently operated by the Orenburg Federation—a real dragon, this one. There will be nothing that could match it. And now we must christen it with a suitable name.”

Hitler thought for a moment. “Why, you have just said it yourself,” he remarked. “*Fáfnir*, the old Norse sky dragon. Call the ship *Fáfnir*, and the next in this class will be *Fraenir*, his brother. When will this one be ready?”

“Very soon,” said Goring, a pleased smile on his face.

“Bomb Berlin with an airship will they?” Hitler looked at his corpulent Luftwaffe Chief. “Well, this is what they get in return. Can it cross the Atlantic and get back safely?”

“My Führer, it could circumnavigate the entire earth without refueling if we desired. Of course, the fuel to payload ratio must always be considered. The more fuel, the smaller the payload.”

“Well can it carry enough bombs to make the trip worthwhile?”

“We will be able to configure such a ship as a dedicated high altitude bomber. It will have fewer weapon mounts, but many more bombs. For example, the Heinkel-111 can carry 2000 kilograms. But here, if we forego these new 88 gun mounts, we can add 8000kilos of additional bomb ordnance. Nor will we need the many recoilless rifles I have described earlier on the bomber variant, which saves even more weight. A single Zeppelin can therefore carry as many bombs as an entire squadron of Heinkels.”

“Excellent. Then we have here our Amerika Bomber. Continue with the other aircraft designs as well. I want to see the prototypes as soon as they are ready.”

“We will show you the JU-300 soon, and the Focke-Wulf Ta-400 and Heinkel He-277. Once we determine which is the best, production will begin full throttle.”

“How many of these new airships will there be?”

“*Fáfnir* is ready this month. His brother ship in thirty days. Once proven, we can ramp up production very quickly. We have all the old factories and facilities from the first war available.”

“Build at least ten,” said Hitler, and Goring nodded, only too happy to comply. “Can we get the helium for that many?”

“Orenburg should be able to accommodate us. They have production sites at Dobycha near Orenburg itself, another at Astrakhan, and a third location called Karachaganakskoye.” He stumbled with that. “Forgive me, but it is often impossible to pronounce these long Russian names.”

“Why not simply extract it from the atmosphere?”

“My Führer, I am told it is extremely rare, only a little over five parts per million in the atmosphere. However, it can be found in natural gas deposits and extracted there. Some sites have as much as 5% helium. After inquiries, we have learned they are in the Caspian region, Algeria, the Persian Gulf, and Iran, and perhaps even in eastern Siberia, which may be why they have been building up their airship fleet so quickly.”

“I see...” That set Hitler’s mind to thinking. Perhaps there was more to Raeder’s Plan Orient than first met the eye and ear. Then the Führer turned to his Luftwaffe Chief, a different question in his eyes.

“Herr Reichsminister,” he said. “I want you to organize a reconnaissance mission over Siberian territory for the maiden voyage of these airships.”

“Of course,” said Goring. “We must ascertain where they are relocating their factories and tank production sites—and the oil. They must be getting it somewhere. My information indicates several sites in Siberia are now involved with oil production.”

“Find them all,” said Hitler, with that tone in his voice that might have been the growl of *Fáfnir* himself, low and threatening. “Yes, find them all, and I want you to add one more site to your list. It is a small railway depot, about 20 kilometers east of Kansk. The same place our transport planes landed in that stupid operation Volkov planned. That man has had an obsession with that location for the last year. Find out why. He keeps claiming it is a weapons development site, but for all his raids, the only thing he has ever found were plans. The name of this site is Ilanskiy, and I want a full report as soon as possible. Don’t forget this.”

The renowned German Admiral Alfred von *Tirpitz* had once scoffed at

the Zeppelin fleet, and of its strongest advocate, *Kapitanleutnant Peter Strasser* he once said: “Strasser is slightly mad, and carried away with the idea that airships are more important than battleships.”

Hitler smiled inwardly at that, realizing that this massive airship before him could easily bomb London from heights that would leave it immune to enemy defenses. It could do this to any city in England, while his battleships could not think to come anywhere near the British homeland. Yes, he thought. I will build a fleet of these airships. The only problem will be finding adequate supplies of Helium. We once ruled the skies over England with such ships, but the fact that we were forced to use Hydrogen put an end to the Zeppelin terror during the first great war, and in fact, it put an end to Peter Strasser himself, the man who flew the last raid over England. Live by the sword; die by the sword. We will not repeat that mistake again. I know someone who can give us all the Helium we might need, and all the oil as well.

Kaiser Wilhelm was very squeamish about bombing England in the first war, but I have no such scruples. They will bomb Germany, and I will bomb England. What a marvelous launch platform these airships would be for our new rocket weapons when they are developed. In fact, not even the Americans will be safe any longer. My *Luftschiff* fleet can cross the Atlantic, hover off the coast of New York above their fighter cover, and we can launch our *Vergeltungswaffe 1*, the new V1. I am told Project Cherry Stone is coming along nicely. I have not yet decided what to call them. The *Maikafer* is a good name, the little May Bug that rules the summer nights, but that is not so threatening. Perhaps I will simply call them my *Schwarzkrähe*, the Black Crows.

Yes, our Zeppelin fleet can do a good many things! What has the mighty *Hindenburg* done for me in this war? It is more trouble than it is worth, guzzling valuable fuel, foiled by torpedoes and these damnable naval rockets. I still cannot believe they were developed by the Soviets as Volkov tells me. Why didn't they use them to defend Moscow? Volkov says they are not much good against land targets. Their warheads are not much bigger than our own heavy artillery. But against ships, they have proved very effective. Might they also pose a threat to my airships? I must consider that possibility, as I am told these rockets also shoot down aircraft.

Raeder never finishes anything, does he. The one thing he had right was

the importance of seizing Gibraltar, and then Malta, but after that, his plan to leap into Syria came to naught. Even though we bullied Turkey into allowing us to use their railroads, the system was in such bad shape that we would have to spend a year upgrading it to make it worthy of any sustained military use.

I am beginning to see what Halder argues at OKW. Logistics! It was a lack of adequate supplies that stopped us in Russia last winter—that and the damn weather. It was a lack of supplies and material that limited our intervention in Syria, and the same problem now plagues Rommel—that and this new British tank. Hopefully our new shipments of Lions and Panthers will redress that shortcoming, and I am particularly fond of the latest new model, the Tiger.

For now, look at that magnificent airship out there. Soon the British will find out about it, and they will probably roll their eyes, thinking we are fools to waste our time building such things. Once we had Zeppelin bases all over Germany, at Towdern, Hage, Seddin, and Nordholz. The assembly plant buildings at Friedrichshafen and Potsdam still remain, and they are now being completely renovated. Soon our new *Luftschiff* fleet will be second to none, and I can have these airships fairly quickly. The entire fleet of ten I have ordered now could be built for the cost of a single battleship, and ten times faster. We were launching two every month during the last war, and that will be the case here again—very soon.

I must speak to Admiral Raeder on this. We will want to reestablish the Naval Airship Division—not with these massive dreadnoughts like *Fafnir*, but with leaner, faster and smaller airships to be used for fleet reconnaissance. I am sure he will warm to the idea, and they will give the British fits! We can use them to scour the seas and find the Royal Navy, and better yet, to spot the convoys for Döenitz and his wolfpacks, or even attack them. What a marvelous base Iceland would make for our airships. I was a fool not to seize that island in 1940. Now the Americans are there, and the navy tells me there is no way they can keep our troops supplied if we did invade. That may be true, but these airships could have done that job.

Perhaps the Army could use these airships in a similar role in Russia. Yes, they are perfect for scouting out the vast hinterlands of Asia. That is why Volkov built so many, though his fleet has been outmaneuvered and badly beaten by this upstart Siberian. When I send *Fafnir* and his brother to find out

what he has in his pockets over there, we will see how bold he is.

Yet I foresee one potential problem—the airship sheds. It was Churchill who ordered preemptive attacks against our sheds and hangers in the first war. They are massive structures, and easy to spot from the air. They will certainly become prime targets for the RAF, and Volkov has warned me about the Allied bombers on more than one occasion. I could always have them built in occupied Russia, well out of reach of the Allied Bombers. Volkov uses small mooring towers with specialized crews for refueling and maintenance. Those could be built anywhere.

I am told the British Wellingtons have a service ceiling of only 18,000 feet. The Lancasters and American B-17s fly much higher, but our airships can go higher yet, so we could hover over our cities, and shoot down at the bombers with this new 88mm gun I am shown here. That will be a nasty little surprise for the RAF, because they have no fighters that can reach Germany, and even if they did, they could not climb high enough to bother our new Zeppelins.

Why didn't I see all of this before? Volkov is very clever, and he certainly saw the usefulness of Zeppelins long ago. Very well, I will order the designers to produce the Naval scout model, but first I'll want this first lot of dreadnaughts. *Fafnir's* maiden voyage will prove their worth. I have already given orders that any Zeppelin Master from the first war that still lives is to begin the training programs for the air crews and service personnel required. That will all be left in Goring's hands, and though he is a bungler when it comes to strategy, the one thing he does get right is logistics.

So then, Raeder has his new ships, and now Goring will have a nice new Zeppelin fleet to darken the skies of our enemies. And I have one very special mission in mind for a ship like *Fafnir*. Our *Uranprojekt* will be the weapon that will shake the world to its foundations. Yes... I will give *Fafnir* the fire of death and destruction, and he will be the dragon that consumes our enemies—everywhere. Not even America will escape our retribution. In fact, New York may be a much better target than London....

Chapter 9

Captain Putchkin was very tired that day. He took his post on the bridge of the *Angara* as always, but with little enthusiasm. He had drawn overwatch duty again for Ilanskiy. It was his duty to stand the watch with his Topaz Radar, covering all the taiga north of the city, the direction most enemy raids had come from. One of the bigger ships, the *Sevastopol*, would be moored at Ilanskiy itself, and *Abakan* had the south watch.

That nice fat Soviet ship gets the mooring tower this morning. Which means they'll likely haul up fresh eggs, bread and sausage for breakfast, and perhaps even a few nice girls for the officers. For us, there's only this endless taiga. How far does it go? One day I must take my airship way up north to the Arctic Sea. Few men have ever seen that territory. But for now, patrol duty, endless, routine, mind numbing patrol duty.

He was a man in his mid 40s, grey at his temples just beginning, a little belly as well, but his father and mother had both been heavy, and he was likely to turn out the same way.

"Elevation?" He said nonchalantly to his Elevatorman, Pavel Kornalev.

"Passing through 2000 meters. Ballast secure and releasing on schedule. Engines one and three running smoothly."

"Very well, climb to 3000 meters. Ahead two thirds on engines two and four. Up elevator five degrees. We'll take it nice and easy—God knows we have plenty of time out here. Helmsman, come to zero-four-five degrees northeast. We'll cruise on over to the Biryusa River and then make our next turn."

That was the routine, 045 Degrees northeast to the Mirnyy Nob, a sharp bend in the Biryusa River near that village. Then they would just turn north, follow the course of the river up to the Big Bend, and the village of Biryusa itself. They'd then make a turn to port on 330, taking a short cut across the taiga until they saw the river again. This time it would lead them due west, until it made a sharp turn to the north. At that point, they would be about 130 kilometers north of Kansk, completing the first half of their patrol. From there, they would steer 225 southwest until they hit the much bigger Yenisei River, and follow that south until it split. They would take the smaller left

fork, a tributary called the Kan River, and that would lead them right to Kansk, with Ilanskiy just a few minutes to the east.

It was just routine now—too much so. Doesn't Karpov know that Volkov still has men on the ground out here? Yes, we never could account for all the men he airlifted in here in those raids. Most were killed or captured, but I'll bet my left thumb that some made it clean away into the Taiga. I wouldn't like their lot, trying to survive out there, and live off the land, particularly in winter. But summer can be even worse. The permafrost melts in places, and the bogs make overland travel damn near impossible. Yes, the bogs, bugs, bears and tigers—Siberia is no place for a man to live with any comfort.

So his morning began that way, finding those rivers, drifting along their winding courses, seeing the sun gleaming on the water, stark in contrast to the green of the forest and taiga below. It wasn't until they reached the Big Bend in the Biryusa that things got interesting. The buzzer on the bridge gondola sounded noisily, and the Captain looked over his shoulder to see which station was calling. He thought it might be engineering, something with that gimpy tail that had been damaged in that battle with Volkov's ships. It had been repaired, but was never quite the same as far as he was concerned. He had been an officer on this ship earlier, and now he got the promotion to Captain, his first real command, and he had taken to noticing things like that—any odd quiver or vibration in the rigging of his airship. It was his now, all his.

"Forward Radar Station," he muttered aloud. "Now what's this about?" He went over to the intercom, punched the button and spoke. "Bridge. This is the Captain."

"Aye sir, we have a contact to report—just came on the screen, sir. Single contact, bearing 350 true north of our position, range 80 kilometers. Working on elevation now." He was not reading from an *Oko* panel, as they were too few to deploy on a small cruiser like Angara. This was just the modified RUS-2 radar set that Karpov had designated Topaz, with a maximum range of about 110 kilometers for airborne surveillance. It was not really very accurate, and the operator was using a combination of the reading received, his own experience, and a good deal of guessing. Yet one thing was certain. Something was out there.

"Speed?" asked the Captain

"Reading now sir. I have it fairly low and slow. About 3500 meters,

maybe 80KPH.”

That did not sound good, thought Putchkin. It was much too slow for a plane, and what would a plane be doing out there in any case. No. It was another airship, and any sighting of that sort could mean only one thing, trouble. “Very well, Elevatorman, up bubble 15 degrees and take us to 4000 meters immediately. We have unexpected company. The ship will come to action stations.” He leaned to a voice pipe up to the main body officer’s station. “Mister Suslov, to the bridge. Action stations!”

Then the captain walked through an open hatch to his radio room. “Signal Kansk. We have an unidentified contact to our north at 80 kilometers. Use a chart. Ask if we have any traffic up there I might not know of.” He strode away, unhappy. Cruiser Captains were always the last to know anything—Topaz Men—that was what they were called in the fleet. The dreadnoughts all had that fancy new radar set, the Oko system. What a wonder that was. It could see an airship out to 200 kilometers, smaller planes at 150, and it could track them unerringly, up to 40 separate contacts. A Topaz set could detect, but it would not track accurately. But that reminded him.

“Radioman, also put in a signal to Kansk. Tell them they had better get *Sevastopol* off the tower and up to 4000 meters.”

It looked like breakfast was over back there, and they had better get the girls down the tower ladder and be quick about it. Trouble at 3500 meters means you get your ass to 4000 meters. They climb, and you clime right with them, always to maintain that minimum 500 meter edge. Stretch it to a thousand for good measure, but he’d wait until they climbed through this leg, and then see what the contact did in response.

Damn, he thought. Haven’t we kicked Volkov hard enough out here? What’s he doing here now, testing our readiness with a single airship out making a probe? What kind of airship? How big would this one be? We kicked his ass roundly the last time we fought. That Karpov is one lethal son-of-a-bitch when he gets to war, and that’s no brag. He’s well west now, some 800 kilometers west at Novosibirsk on the Ob River line position. That has to be it—the Ob River line battle. Volkov has been pushing there again, building up men and equipment for the last month. He’s going to mount another offensive there, sure as rain, and so that’s where Karpov is with the dreadnoughts. So in that light, this traffic up north makes sense now, doesn’t it? Somebody is edging in for a look around.

He strode back onto the main bridge, ringing up the radar post in the nose of the ship. “Radar—anything more?”

“Contact still at 3500 meters, range about 70 kilometers now.”

“Very well, keep me informed.”

Five minutes, 10 kilometers off the range. We’re closing on one another at 160KPH combined speed. So that means we might get a visual on this one in under half an hour. Has he seen us? Does Volkov have radar sets too? If he has, he’s not moved a muscle to climb. Cheeky bastard, this one. I’d better get forward to the observation section. Telescope time soon enough, and then after that, the rifles. But I hope to God this isn’t anything big. We’ve got elevation now, but that could change, and *Angara* isn’t a high climber. Yes, that could change very quickly.

Putchkin sweated out the next 20 minutes, getting that feeling of adrenalin anxiety in his gut. He paced in the observation section, called up to radar every ten minutes, then settled in behind a telescope, waiting. Visibility was good, with just a scattering of white fluffy clouds. Then he saw it, a glint in the sky, right where he expected it beneath a cottony cloud, dead ahead.

That’s an airship alright, and it looks to be a big one. But I’ll lose the damn thing in that cloud if he climbs. “Signalman,” he shouted over his shoulder to the radio room behind him. “Put out a challenge in the clear. Hail that bastard and demand identification.”

“Aye sir.”

He heard the man’s voice reading out the hail, the tension building with each moment. He didn’t expect anything would come back, but was shocked when he heard the crackle of another voice on the radio, inclining his head, one eye on the distant contact.

“Siberian airship, heave too and surrender. Prepare to be boarded. This is Deutschland Luftshiff Fafnir, and you are hereby taken as a prize of war.”

“What? To hell with that!” said Putchkin aloud. “Prize of war? Surrender, is it?” He slapped the telescope hard, stomped back through the radio room to the main gondola bridge, and looked for his first officer, Suslov. The man was leaning down to get a look at the contact from the bottom windows, but he saluted when the Captain came in.

“What in god’s name is this doych land loof shit? Where in god’s name is Fafnir?” Airships were always named for cities. Everybody knew that, but he had never heard of that place. Suslov just scratched his head.

“It looks big, Captain. Perhaps we ought to climb.”

“We’ve got damn near 700 meters elevation on them now, to my eye, and they’re turning, about 9 klicks out. No need to worry yet.” The Captain had a very good eye. His Radarman could not yet give him an accurate range, particularly this close, but his Mark One Eyeball was well experienced. They had turned, so he would turn as well, and maintain this cautious safe gap interval. Even a good 105mm recoilless rifle could only range out seven klicks on a good day like this. If I keep this interval, they can’t lay a finger on me—nor I them.

“Radioman. Tell them this is the airship *Angara*, Siberian Aerocorps. And then tell them to go to hell. They are violating Free Siberian airspace, and if they do not immediately withdraw, they will be fired upon.”

“Look at that thing,” said Suslov in a low voice. “My God, Captain, It’s a real monster. Big as *Tunguska*—bigger!”

Putchkin had his field glasses up watching the contact skirt the edge of that cloud. If he climbs in there, then up we go, another 200 meters. We’ve got the ballast to drop, and *Angara* is very nimble. Yes, they can out climb us in the long run with those big fat airbags under that nice pretty canopy, but in the short run, we’re faster in a climb, and more maneuverable. I can dance up to the top of that cloud, sit there, and when they stick that big snout of theirs through the top, I’ll blast them to hell.

It was a good plan, but he would not get the chance to carry it out. He heard a sharp crack in the distance, and then seconds late the sky near his ship erupted with a dark black rose of an exploding shell. It was just close enough to flay the main gondola with shrapnel, and he instinctively grabbed his balls. Fire from below had a way of making a man very uncomfortable, but the round was perhaps 500 meters short.

Yet it shouldn’t have been that close at all, he thought with some alarm. What’s he got out there, some new 105 with better range? “Five points to starboard,” he said. “That was a little too close. Elevator man, ten degrees up and all ahead full. Take us up through 4500 meters.”

He looked at Suslov now, astounded. “Well don’t just stand there gawking, Mister Suslov, “answer that goddamned round!”

“But sir, we won’t hit them at this range, not even close.”

“Answer it, by god. Use the 105 in the nose!”

Suslov gave the order, and *Angara* cracked out a single round in reply, if

only to say they were none too happy with what the other ship had done. There came an immediate reply, that hard distinctive crack, and then the hiss of a fast round coming at them, followed by the thump of canvas penetration, then a shuddering explosion.

“Mother of God!” Putchkin shouted. “They put that one right into our guts. Damage control, report!” He was on the voice tube now, but he already knew they had lost a gas bag, the high, whining hiss of the helium leaking was the telltale sound to worry about. That was from a hole in a gas bag that was just too big for the vulcanized rubber lining to reseal. A machinegun hit, even up to a 20mm round would sound more like a man letting air spurt out from the end of a balloon, fart like, and then come to a sibilant hissing kissing sound as the wound resealed.

God bless the Vulcan bag lining, but we just got hit with a bag buster, and a damn good one. The range has to be over ten clicks now.

“Captain, we’re losing buoyancy. I can’t climb now with just the engines. We’ll have to drop ballast.”

“Then piss it out man! Climb! Climb!”

The Elevator man sounded the claxon, and pulled the emergency ballast drop lever. Water would cascade from the nose of the ship, lightening it there and helping to get the nose pointed up quickly.

Crack, came another round, and another hit. By God, we’ve got to be twelve clicks away, well beyond rifle range. All they could possibly have up on top is a 105, but it’s one hell of a gun. They’ve blasted us again, we’ll lose another gas bag with that one.

“Captain,” came a watchman. “Damage control says that hit the reserve Oxygen. We’ve got a fire!”

Those were words that would freeze their blood of any airship Captain, no matter how salty he was. Fire was the last thing he ever wanted to see, for they carried limited amounts of water, due to its weight, and to fight a fire you had to be quick, and generous with whatever water they had. They would have to divert ballast water if this was serious, and something told him it was.

“God-damnit!” he swore. “Radio man, put out a distress call. Note we’re under fire and taking damage. Request immediate support—our position. *Sevastopol* had better damn well be up at elevation by now. Tell them there’s a big fucker from Fafnir out here, wherever the hell that is.” He was still thinking the ship’s name was a city. “By God, that looks to be a German

insignia there. Can you see that, Suslov?”

Suslov leaned to peer through the lower gondola window panes again, squinting through his binoculars. Then the next round came right on through that window, and exploded.

That little disagreement was going to send alarms all through the Siberian Aerocorps. Three more airships were pulled off the Ob River line, and moved to the scene, but when they arrived, the mysterious ship, *Fafnir*, was long gone, it's mission accomplished... For the moment....

* * *

A month later, and 3500 miles to the west in London, Admiral Tovey was thinking over the situation in Russia, and with worrisome thoughts. Things were not good. The Soviets had stopped the Germans, even drove them back in their Winter Offensive, but it was high spring now, and the Germans were on the move again. The Soviets desperately needed supplies while they struggled to re-establish their factories on Siberian Territory. There was really only one way to get them there in quantity by sea, and it would now lead to one of the hardest fought convoy sagas of the war.

“What's next in the number sequence for Murmansk?” he asked a staffer when he reached the Admiralty.

“Sir?” The young man looked at a clip board, flipping up a page. “Number 17, sir. Teeing up now at Reykjavik. Convoy PQ-17.”

Part IV

PQ-17

“It's not because things are difficult that we dare not venture. It's because we dare not venture that they are difficult.”

— Seneca

Chapter 10

The convoys to Russia had begun with all optimism, in spite of the ever present threat from the German Navy, and in the beginning it seemed the effort would prove fruitful. With Ivan Volkov sitting in the Caucasus, and the Japanese controlling Vladivostok, there was only one way to Soviet Russia, the icy northern route to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. From there, Allied supplies and equipment could move by rail down to Leningrad, the one major city in Russia that remained secure from enemy attack. By May of 1942, twelve convoys had been sent, and with the loss of only one of 103 merchant ships, largely because the heavy losses at sea had prompted Raeder to keep his remaining capital ships in port.

Graf Spee and *Graf Zeppelin* were gone, along with *Gneisenau*. *Hindenburg* was at Gibraltar, and *Bismarck* laid up with extensive repair work at Toulon. In the north, that left only the *Tirpitz* as a threat powerful enough to challenge any Royal Navy ship it encountered, but that fact alone meant that each and every convoy to Murmansk had to be covered with a sizable force that would include at least one battleship and one carrier for air support. Admiral Dudley Pound lamented that the convoys were becoming a “regular millstone around our neck.” It was enough to have fast battleships available to watch the breakout zones to the Atlantic. Having to assign a battleship to convoy duty in the far north was indeed a regular added burden on the already strained resources of the Royal Navy.

Commander P.Q. Edwards was a very busy man as he organized this effort, and the code names for the convoys would steal his initials, PQ. For the first six months, the principal threat to the convoys was mounted by the U-Boats operating from bases in Norway. That long, ragged coast stretched the whole way along the eastern flank of the convoy route, and the U-boats would sortie like moray eels emerging from their dark hidden caves to strike at schools of slow moving merchant ships. Bombers at German controlled airfields also posed a grave threat, and in the late spring of 1942, the attacks began to ratchet up.

Admiral Tovey remarked that if the Germans ever added a credible surface threat, they might easily overwhelm the effort to escort and guard these precious supply runs. Yet the convoys simply had to get through. Soviet

Russia had barely survived the winter of 1941, and every sign now pointed to an impending German summer offensive that might knock the Soviets right out of the war, a disaster that had to be forestalled at any cost. Russia needed munitions, food, oil, and most of all trucks and aircraft. The Murmansk Run was the only way to get those vital supplies through, and so that millstone had to be carried, no matter what the cost, and the escorts had to be found.

Tovey had been warned of one bloody choke point in the history that waited to be re-written—Convoy PQ-17. Fedorov had told him it had been savaged by the Germans, but as the numbered convoys were ticked off in the schedule, no German surface threat appeared. Then, spooked by faulty intelligence that the Allies were planning an invasion of Norway, Hitler ordered Raeder to strongly reinforce Norwegian ports and coastal defenses. With this order, the effort to build a strong bastion in the north for the Kriegsmarine was redoubled. Trondheim was selected as the best location, and the long planned naval air base there would suddenly be built out to a scale never seen in Fedorov's history. It would be called 'Nordstern,' the North Star of the Reich, and so in May of 1942, Raeder ordered the cream of his surface ships in the north to sail from German ports for the cold waters of the north.

The German force there would soon be comprised of the Battleship *Tirpitz*, the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst*, two new Panzerschiff super heavy cruisers, *Rhineland* and *Westfalen*, and the two older commerce raiders, *Lutzow* and *Admiral Scheer*. Reaching Nordstern first, the *Tirpitz* made one threatening run to let the British know the game had now changed. Admiral Ciliax took the ship out with three destroyers to get after convoy PQ-12, but the presence of British carrier borne aircraft forced a hard lesson. Albacores bravely harried the foe with their torpedoes, forcing *Tirpitz* into a wild evasive dance on the sea, with every AA gun firing as it ran for the cover of friendly planes to the east. While no hits were scored, Raeder immediately ordered a halt to sorties into the Norwegian Sea until the Northern Fleet was further reinforced.

Five more ships would be sent, the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, and the first of his fast ocean going destroyers in the new *Valkyrie* Class. This last group would form the main escort for one more notable addition—the aircraft carrier *Peter Strasser*. That was really what Raeder had been waiting for, a ship that could again provide the necessary aerial reconnaissance for the fleet.

The workmen had been working feverishly in the shipyards to get the ship operational, and now it was finally ready.

With that single ship the entire balance would be upset in the north, for now the Germans could take out sea based fighter cover, and the British would be forced to double down on their own carrier assignments to PQ convoys. Raeder had kept all these ships ‘in the cupboard’ for long months after the heavy losses off Fuerteventura in the south. All the while, he husbanded precious fuel oil to support a major operation, and quietly shipped it to Nordstern with the small convoys lifting troops, workmen, and supplies. Now, with the completion of the new base, and the arrival of *Peter Strasser*, it was time for his knights to sally forth.

The news of this major naval move coursed like ice through the veins of the Admiralty. Admiral Tovey had been busy planning the raid on Saint Nazaire when the word came in, and he was forced to depart on a plane from the Azores immediately. Up until that time, Admiral Holland had been Chief of the Nore while Tovey was operating in the South, still aboard the ship that should have been sunk the previous May, the venerable HMS *Hood*. The much needed support from the Americans had relieved the British on Iceland and the watch on the Denmark Strait. There, an older battleship, the *Mississippi*, and a new addition, the *Massachusetts*, had been holding down that patrol zone, allowing Holland and *Hood* to watch the Faeroes Gap.

“Gentlemen,” said Tovey. “This is a most unwelcome turn of affairs. *King George V* has been the mainstay for convoy covering operations, backstopped by the *Hood*, but I’ve had to send her south now to reinforce *Duke of York* in Force H. Now this new German battle fleet settling in at Trondheim is the most powerful threat we have faced in the north since Lütjens first began his major breakout sorties. Lütjens is gone, and there’s no telling who the Germans might be sending in his place, but those ships intend mischief. Under the circumstances, the entire PQ convoy schedule could be ripped to shreds.”

“This new base at Trondheim is getting more than ships,” said Admiral Pound. “The Germans are reinforcing their air squadrons there as well, and we must also expect that Döenitz will send more U-boats. PQ-16 had 36 ships, and all but 8 arrived safely. We’ve been lucky thus far with these runs up to Murmansk, but now it looks like they’re going for the jugular.”

“PQ-17 is up next,” said Tovey, shuddering inwardly as he considered all

that Fedorov had told him. “Might we postpone that convoy until we sort this all out?”

“We might,” said Pound, “but the Prime Minister won’t hear of it. The Germans are on the move again in Russia. They’ve been repositioning most of their mobile forces on the southeastern segment of that huge bag they’ve been in all winter. That Soviet winter offensive was remarkable, and a godsend to the war effort as a whole, but the Soviets are played out. Their divisions are spent, troops exhausted, and they need new equipment, trucks, and more than anything, aircraft. Churchill insists that we maintain the convoy schedule. Sergei Kirov has made a direct appeal that every effort be made. Gentlemen, if we lose the Soviets now, we lose this war—it is just that simple. The American President Roosevelt is equally insistent, and the belief now is that we should proceed, even if we sustain heavy losses. If even half the ships get through, that would be acceptable to the war cabinet. So let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work here. What can we do?”

Tovey shrugged. “Up until now, we have only had to worry about the *Scharnhorst* up near Tromsø. The Germans have restricted their surface sorties to the North Cape region. Now, with this buildup at Trondheim, we must consider that they could just as easily sortie directly from that port, meaning we’ll have to provide much stronger escorts in the close covering force. Rear-Admiral Hamilton’s cruiser squadron will have to be reinforced,” said Tovey.

“More easily said than done,” said Pound. “We lost *Edinburgh* when it was hit by U-boats while escorting PQ-15. Jerry tried to finish her off with destroyers, but there was nothing wrong with *Edinburgh*’s guns and they put the destroyer *Hermann Schoemann* down for good. But they managed to get off one more torpedo, and that finished our cruiser off. *Trinidad* was up at Murmansk and nursing a wound on the way home. The Luftwaffe got to that one. Even with our new *Knight* Class cruisers coming active, we’re still stretched thin on that count.”

“At least we’ve taught them they can’t sortie with destroyers as long as we can still cover those convoys with cruisers. The catch is finding those ships. *Norfolk* was scheduled to return, but I had to order her to remain on station with Force H, along with both the *Knight* Class cruisers. That leaves us with very little to spare. *Kent* has been on the Murmansk Runs for some time, and was scheduled for refit. I’m afraid her Type 273 radar set will have

to wait. We'll need her for one more run. We've assigned *London*, and *Cumberland* is now available after her repair and refit. We were going to send *Shropshire* to the Australians, but that's impossible with this news, so count on that ship as well. *Nigeria* is available, along with *Jamaica*, and both of those ships are presently watching the Faeroes Gap. They could join *Hood* for the distant Covering Force. *Newcastle* and *Sheffield* are at Scapa Flow if needed, and they'll sail with the two new battleships, *Anson* and *Howe*."

"Here-here," said Pound, tapping the conference table. "It's about time we got some fresh blood for the battleships. The Americans will also send their fast battleship *Massachusetts* for the close cover force. That should help out immensely."

"Hopefully so," said Tovey. "Now then... The waters east of Bear Island have been the real danger point all along, but with this new naval facility the Germans have established near Trondheim, I'm inclined to think we may find trouble well before we reach the cape. Logistically, it's much more economical for the Germans to Operate from Nordstern."

"The North Cape was always a choke point," said Pound. "The ice forces us south near the Norwegian coast, and under their air power at Kirkenes and Petsamo. And the U-boats love those restricted waters."

"Yes, well the arrival of *Peter Strasser* changes all that. Now the Germans can take their air power out to sea, and so we'll need a second aircraft carrier on this run. *Ark Royal* is the only candidate, and I propose that we add her to the Home Fleet Squadron coming up from Scapa Flow."

"Very well," Pound agreed. "Four battleships, two carriers, eight cruisers.... With these dispositions, I'm prepared to go forward with PQ-17, and Godspeed, gentlemen."

*Bf-109-A, Norwegian Sea, 200 Nautical Miles East-Northeast of Jan
Mayen, June 15, 1942, 15:18 Hours*

The convoy was two weeks early in this history, and already on its third day out from Halva Fiord when first contact came. Flight Leutnant Eric Meyers was elated to have been the very first pilot to take a plane up off the *Peter Strasser* on a bona fide combat patrol. The carrier had rendezvoused with the battleship *Tirpitz*, which was now 180 nautical miles west of Tromso with *Rhineland*, *Westfalen*, and three of the Z-Class Destroyers, *Valkyrie*,

Brynhild and *Grimhild*. Another 42 nautical miles to the south, Kurt Hoffmann was cruising in the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* with the heavy cruiser *Hipper* and two more of the new destroyers, *Gunnar* and *Sigurd*. Once again, the German Navy was now operating in a manner that was quite different. Instead of isolated raiders, those two battlegroups now sailed in close support range, and *Peter Strasser* had just begun routine recon operations to the west. Meyers soon had an eyeful.

He had come down from the north, ready to make a turn and head back towards the carrier, when the clear creamy wakes of several ships were evident on the calm seas beneath him. The weather had been excellent, and he had come down to 12,000 feet to get a better look at what he now believed was the main British covering force for their next convoy. There was a battleship, a cruiser, several destroyers and a carrier. The battleship was unmistakable, long, sleek and with four twin turrets, not the old fat profile of the *Queen Elizabeth* class. This was the *Hood*. Knowing there would most likely be fighters up, he decided to look for his wing mate and head east,

With Ciliax taken ill, General-Admiral Rolf Carls had been given overall responsibility for coordinating the maneuver. When he got the report, he realized that his advanced scouts, the *Admiral Scheer* and *Lutzow*, would be very close to that contact, but clearly no match for the *Hood*. He immediately sent a signal ordering them to turn southwest, thinking that they might best slip by the British to see what may be lurking beyond. At 16:20, however, he received yet another sighting report, this time from Kapitänleutnant Friedrich-Karl Marks on *U-376*. He had taken his boat out from Bergen on June 7th, looking for British merchant shipping coming up from Iceland. This time he saw a good deal more—another British battleship, two cruisers and two destroyers about 140 nautical miles west of the two *Deutschland* class raiders.

It was now quite clear that something big was up. This convoy had to be very important to warrant the commitment of so many British ships. Then again, Kapitan Topp on the *Tirpitz* had little doubt that the British had observed the new addition to their own fleet. They had to know *Peter Strasser* was at sea, and perhaps they intended to try and sink that ship. Would there be naval rockets this time? The old commander of *Graf Zeppelin* had been fished out of the sea in the Atlantic—Kurt Böhmer. Instead of retiring him in shame, Raeder had put him right back in his old position as

Kapitan Sur Zee of Flugzeugträger Nord, a most desirable position. Familiar with the class, Böhmer was getting a second chance now, but he had been told, in no uncertain terms, that he must always operate with a destroyer off each side of his ship. That was a thankless job for the destroyer Kapitan, to realize their ships were there to shield the carrier from rocket attack. Yet it was just one way an escorting ship would stand on defense of its charge.

So there it was, two strong battlegroups on either side, each with an aircraft carrier at hand in what was about to become a classic duel in the north. When Flight Lieutenant Eric Meyers found Topp's battlegroup again, the sky above it was already dark with crows. The Stukas had formed up over the carrier in two squadrons of 9 planes each, and six more Bf-109s were already heading west to engage any enemy CAP that might be up on defense. Meanwhile, at 16:48, *U-376* signaled it had positively identified the cruisers *London* and *Shropshire*, asking for permission to attack. It was granted.

The long agony that was PQ-17 was about to begin.

Chapter 11

Even though Meyer's sighting would be over 40 minutes cold by the time they launched, the *Stuka* pilots would simply head west with every confidence they would find the enemy again. Only a few of the Ju-87 pilots had seen much combat in Russia. Most were specially recruited for the navy, with training on carrier based operations, but not in the grueling mill of close ground support. As such, few had ever really attacked an enemy ship at sea, but they were now about to get their first real opportunity. The long white wake of HMS *Hood* was soon spotted by one of the leading fighters, and word was flashed to the strike squadrons to follow his lead.

Victorious had six fighters up that afternoon, in three groups of two, with another two planes spotted for immediate takeoff. The Martlets, as they called them, were really the American F-4F Wildcat, already a proven carrier based fighter in the Pacific. While it was not a match for the Bf-109, it would be good enough in numbers to provide a decent CAP over Holland's group. They had spotted Meyers earlier, chased him briefly until he sped away to the north, and then lost him. When CAP 2 saw the first BF-109 again, they thought it might be the same bandit still lurking about to try and shadow the battlegroup, but they soon learned the enemy was bringing uninvited guests.

Word was flashed to *Victorious*, and Captain Henry Bovell immediately ordered up those two ready Martlets as CAP 4. Soon the dizzy fighter duel began, which was just what the Germans intended while the 18 *Stukas* made a beeline for the enemy ships below. They had two primary targets, that battleship and the carrier, and each of the two squadrons took one ship, screaming down with their Jericho trumpets wailing like banshees. More planes were launching from *Victorious* even as the enemy came in, the sea suddenly erupting with the tall splashes of the bombs. Most fell very wide, their thunder exploding beneath the surface and sending shock waves against the hull, but *Victorious* was a sturdy ship, and weathered the blows easily enough. The same thing was happening to *Hood*, which was straddled but largely missed by the bombs, her heavier side armor shrugging off the shock of two very near misses. Finally, one bomb hit, but it was well forward on the newly armored deck, and caused little real harm.

It looked to be a mediocre showing, until the last *Stuka* came in and put a bomb right through the flight deck near the island on *Victorious*. It would reach the hanger deck and explode to take out three Martlets and six Albacores, though fortunately none of those planes were armed or fueled, and so the damage was restricted to the loss of the planes, which was bad enough. For that hit, the best of the lot, the crows lost one plane coming in, and two more were taken down by the Martlets on the way out. But those Bf-109s were also exacting a toll on the British fighters, and five of twelve that eventually got up into the fray would not make it home. It was all over by 18:00 and the planes were heading home to their respective carriers. The long hours of day light in these northern latitudes made for easy flying, but it was still several hours before *Peter Strasser* had collected all her aircraft again.

General-Admiral Rolf Carls, with his flag aboard the *Tirpitz*, immediately sent over an order to get all the *Stukas* rearmed and fueled, and that would again take over two hours, given that several more *Stukas* had minor damage that needed to be addressed. In the meantime, he had four fighters spotted on deck in case the enemy decided to launch a counter strike.

"I doubt they know where we are," said Kapitan Topp. "We've seen no enemy planes over our task force this whole time."

"But yet they know we are out here," said Carls. "The question now is what to do this evening."

"Hoffmann is south of us with *Scharnhorst*," said Topp. "He's too close, and we will not want him tangling with *Hood* alone if they find him there."

"Agreed. We also have the two *Deutschland* class ships well to the south. My inclination is to order Hoffmann to turn and give this enemy covering force a wide berth. As for us, *Peter Strasser* aside, we will continue west on this heading."

"You intend to look for *Hood*?"

"And that enemy carrier as well."

"Good enough." Topp had been wanting to get his ship back into action for many months now. The news of what had happened to *Bismarck* off Fuerteventura had been most disconcerting. But at 21:15, a series of messages from two U-boats would begin the real game. Kapitan Max-Martin Teichert was also out from Bergen in U-456, and he had taken up the watch on another covering force first seen by Marks on U-376 earlier. Together they had identified two British cruisers, and then Marks turned further west,

leaving Teichert to shadow the enemy force. Now he added a battleship to that contact list, an American ship.

“Most likely the *Mississippi*,” said Carls. “It has been operating in the Denmark Strait.” He was wrong, of course, for the Germans did not yet know that a much newer and faster ship had come on the scene, BB *Massachusetts*. That report sent tumblers clicking in the Admiral’s mind, and knowing his enemy well, he realized this must be the close covering force. That meant the real prey was probably close at hand, the nice fat merchant ships of PQ-17.

That was the very same thing Kapitan Marks had in his mind when he turned west at periscope depth, and a little after 21:30 he spotted two groups of enemy merchantmen. After maneuvering for position for some time, torpedoes were in the water at 21:50. Firing in salvos of two, his first fish ran right between the lead ships in the formation, the *Hartelbury* and *Olpana*, missing both. The number two salvo had no better luck, skirting past the bow of the *Samuel Chase* and passing harmlessly through the formation. Frustrated, he put two more torpedoes in the water, grateful that there was no sign of enemy destroyers yet. They would also miss, and he cursed under his breath, this time determined to line up better before his next shot. His determination paid off, much to the chagrin of the *Hartelbury*, which he hit amidships with torpedo 5.

“Got him!” he shouted. “Now fifteen points to port, I can get one more off.” He would then hit the *Richard Bland*, both ships penetrated and with flooding and fires lighting up the scene and undoubtedly getting the Convoy Master to grit his teeth. Now he needed time to let the men manhandle more torpedoes from the magazines and get them mounted in the tubes. So he turned east away from the two ships he had set afire, still running at periscope depth. There was another group of eight merchantmen off his port side, and he was thinking to line up on the nearest ship when his careful eye spotted trouble in the high foaming bow wash of a destroyer. That was enough to dampen his ardor.

“Secure periscope,” he said. “Enemy destroyers to the north. Dive!”

* * *

“Goblin!” said Captain George Stephenson, Master of *Hartlebury*. “Where are the bloody destroyers?”

His First Officer, a man named Gordon, came staggering in from the radio

room. “Got a signal off,” he breathed. “Help is on the way.”

“Look to our damage, would you? I think one of the Oerlikon gun-platforms has collapsed.”

Even as he said that, the Captain had a strange inner thought, seeing himself there on the outer deck, that gun platform right on top of him, hearing the shouts of several men, the gunners that were flung into the sea. His head was throbbing with pain, there was blood running down his forehead into his left eye, and the twisted steel legs of the platform restricted his movement, pinning him to the deck.

He shook his head, as if to chase that fearful image from his mind, but his First Officer’s report was darker than he expected. “The whole mount is gone,” he said. “Five men overboard there, and two guns lost. There’s heavy damage to two others on the deck below, and a nice hole in the hull near the water line—a fire there too, though it looks controllable.”

Right where I might have been, thought Stevenson, though he did not know why. His strange intuition was, in fact, the fate he had suffered in Fedorov’s history, where the *Hartlebury* had been one of the last ships to be hit, well up around the North Cape. In that incarnation, his First Officer and a Marine had dragged him to safety, away from that fire, but that would not be his fate in this time line. Matthew 20: verse 16 applied in some skewed way to this whole affair—‘the last shall be first.’ Here, now, *Hartlebury* had been the first ship hit, and Stevenson was still safely in the confines of the bridge. It was U-355 that had ended the ship’s life in the old history, but now it would be *Hartlebury* that would put an end to U-376.

The destroyers had all been too far ahead, well out in front of the merchant ships, even the four that should have been well aft of the main convoy. Marks had slipped in very quietly to become the first wolf to get at the fold, very pleased with himself. If he had known that he was silently creeping towards his own doom, he might have changed course, picked another target, and lived into his eighth war patrol in the Bay of Biscay as he once did. It took him all eight in that history to get just two ships, and he had already scored two hits here, so he seemed to be riding a resurgent swell in the seas of time. But he had picked on the wrong ship out of sixteen different targets he might have fired at that day. *Hartlebury* was also harboring the Vice Commodore of the entire convoy, and so she had a special Naval Signals staff aboard, who were very quick to get hold of the Aft Destroyer

Screen and read them the riot act. What were they doing forward of his formation if they were the bloody Aft screening force? Couldn't they see that an attack was underway?

So the bow wash Kapitan Marks had seen was from the O-Class Destroyer *Onslaught*, and its name would be well given that day. Chastened by the sharp radio call he had received, and somewhat angry, Commander William Halford Selby was about to put an end to the career of Kapitänleutnant Friedrich-Karl Marks. Selby had spotted the wake from the U-boat periscope just before Marks had given that dive order. Now he turned and bored in relentlessly at 28 knots, knowing that if he was quick to the scene his depth charges would likely find the enemy below.

He was correct. He began his run, two charges at a time, the sea erupting behind him as the *Onslaught* continued. The booming explosions were heard in the convoy, where the men cheered to see their defenders arriving on the scene. Eight charges were put down, one exploding just 200 feet from the submerged U-boat, which was enough to wreak havoc. Fatal flooding followed, and patrol number four would be the last for Kapitan Marks and his crew.

* * *

This little drama would soon be eclipsed by a much greater threat to the life and liberty of PQ-17. The two *Deutschland* Class raiders had been well south, swinging in a wide arc towards the west. Now they knew the position of the enemy convoy, and they were hastening up like a pair of wolves out after a flock of sheep. Yet the course chosen by Kapitan Krancke aboard the *Admiral Scheer* took the raiders right astride the oncoming Home Fleet Group, where the carrier *Ark Royal*, steamed with battleships *Anson* and *Howe*, the cruiser *Newcastle*, and several destroyers. It was yet another plucky destroyer, the *Ledbury*, that would bravely challenge the intruders, turning everyone's well laid plans on their head and setting off a major naval battle that would soon go off like a string of firecrackers. Out in front, *Ledbury* made the first sighting at 21:40, reporting what looked like two cruisers ahead. Unfortunately these cruisers had 11-inch guns, but that did not stop *Ledbury* from engaging with some very disciplined and accurate fire.

Lt. Commander Roger Percival Hill was often called 'Percy' by the men

after his middle name, and for the reason that he had quite openly proclaimed that he was gunning for an appointment to one of the new *Knight Class* heavy cruisers, *Sir Percival*. Before that could happen, he had to get a leg up in rank and another 'Mention in Dispatches,' and he was quite eager to get started here. Hill decided to take his destroyer up to get a closer look, and when the enemy seemed to be putting on speed, he countered by ordering all ahead full. Minutes later, he had a much better look at the silhouettes, and immediately sent a W/T signal indicating he had hold of two *Deutschland Class* 'pocket battleships.' That should have ended his little foray, but Hill was determined, and boldly began opening fire on the trailing ship, the only one within his range. To his great delight, he began getting hits.

Word was flashed from ship to ship, and Admiral Wake-Walker, his Flag aboard the *Ark Royal*, quickly dispatched *Newcastle* to see about getting hold of the German raiders by the heels. He also signaled Captain Charles Woodhouse aboard the battleship *Howe*, and ordered that ship to make a fifteen point turn to port and put on speed. *Anson* and the remaining destroyers would continue on as close escort for *Ark Royal*, which also began spotting planes.

Lt. Commander Hill's audacity was going to reap a considerable harvest, but it would come at a cost. *Lutzow* began returning fire, and minutes later, the leading ship, which Hill presumed to be the *Admiral Scheer*, also joined the action. No destroyer leader in his right mind would stand in a fight under such unfavorable odds, and Hill now realized discretion was the better part of valor here. He gave the order to turn when an 11-inch shell landed so close to the ship that it literally shook loose steam pipes, boiler cowlings and hull plating. *Ledbury* wallowed to one side with the hit, taking two more smaller rounds from secondary guns as she did so. One struck the conning tower, if it could be called as much, smashing the radio room and killing three men there.

Thankfully, the light cruiser *Newcastle* was now racing to the scene, and seeing *Ledbury's* distress, Captain Powlett opened fire on *Lutzow*. The ensuing gun battle then fell upon his ship, with both German raiders redirecting their fire. Powlett's ship should have been in the Mediterranean for Operation Vigorous, a convoy escort to Malta, but that history had changed and so she was reassigned to the Murmansk Run instead. Once Powlett had encountered the twins, both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* on the

23rd of November, 1939, and he had often boasted that he might have had them were it not for foul weather that allowed the German ships to slip away. Fair weather might have sealed his own fate instead, but his bravado was taken for what it was. Now, with *Gneisenau* gone, the British had taken to calling the last two *Deutschland* class ships the younger twins, and Powlett had his moment yet again—only this time the weather was good, with excellent visibility even at this late hour in the far north.

The Captain and *Newcastle* would also find themselves quickly overmatched. The ship was straddled, then pummeled badly five minutes later, seeing two of her four triple 152mm turrets knocked out, along with several Bofors mounts. One hit penetrated her side armor, smashing the boiler room and drastically reducing the ship's speed. That blow might have saved her from more grievous harm, as the lead enemy ship was running on and opening the range. In return *Newcastle* managed three hits on the *Lutzow*, also slowing that ship with boiler damage. It was then that the battleship *Howe* loomed on the horizon, coming up quickly from the southeast. That was the straw that would break the camel's back—for *Lutzow*.

While *Ledbury*'s 120mm guns continued to score numerous hits on the German ship, few penetrated completely, and most of that damage was to superstructure, binocular stations, AA guns, secondary batteries. *Newcastle* had done better, but being hit by an 11-inch shell had put her out of the game and forced Powlett to break off and turn south to save his ship. The appearance of *Howe* ended the matter, her 5.25 inch guns raking the wallowing German ship, which had fallen off in speed to just 7 knots. Then a 14-inch shell found its target, and the resulting blast damage opened *Lutzow*'s hull on the port side below the water line. The ship gulped seawater, the boilers flooded, screws stilled, and *Lutzow* soon went into an uncontrollable list. The second of Germany's fabled pocket battleships was going down that day, and the news would come as an electric shock to Admiral Carls.

Chapter 12

He might have taken it easier if he had stayed in the comfort of his office back at Naval Group North at Kiel, but out here, aboard *Tirpitz*, with the wind raw and the seas grey in the wan light of June 16th, it came harder, colder, and with an edge of foreboding.

He leaned heavily over the map table, his eyes dark with concern. "We have sunk a damn destroyer," he breathed. "And for that we lose the *Lutzow*."

"What about *Scheer*?" asked Kapitan Topp.

"Running northeast, and being chased by a goddamn British battleship. It must be of the *King George V* class to stay in the hunt. And now Hoffmann reports he has sighted another large capital ship as well. Where are the British getting all these battleships?"

"It must be the *Hood*, sir. Pilots reported it was breaking off from that British carrier we attacked earlier today."

"Under the circumstances, I believe we should alter course and move north towards the cape. We know where they are going. Let's get there first. With two British carriers on the scene, the few fighters we have on *Peter Strasser* will not be sufficient. We need to get back under our land based air cover. As for *Admiral Scheer*. I do not think it will be useful to make a run for the Denmark Strait. The Americans have another battleship there, and several cruisers. Their present course suggests that option, and so that alone will have an effect. Instead, I will order Kranke to come about and shadow that convoy, but he is not to engage until we learn more."

At that moment, a messenger came up with a signal, and the Kapitan Topp took it with some interest. "Ah," he said. "U-456 reports two groups of merchantmen escorted by a single destroyer. We've reacquired their position."

Topp had a fleeting thought that the Admiral had suddenly lost his nerve. Earlier, he was talking about hunting for the *Hood*, but now he seemed in no way eager to engage, even though they had a good idea where the battleship was. Aside from HMS *Invincible*, no other ship in the British fleet had quite the reputation of the *Hood*. It's Achilles heel had not yet been exposed, for it never fought that fateful duel with the *Bismarck*. It had fought well against

Lütjens the previous year, and after being hit by *Stukas* off the *Graf Zeppelin*, it had gone in for a refit that saw its deck armor toughened up considerably.

Perhaps the Admiral was wise to give that ship the respect it was due, thought Topp. Most of the medals on his chest date to the first war—that's when he won that Iron Cross. But like *Hood*, I must give the man his due respect as well. His reasons for turning east now are sound. And yet... we are standing on the bridge of the *Tirpitz*. One day we will meet that ship. I can feel it, and today is as good a day as any other.

A second message arrived at 06:50. "*Rhineland* and *Westfalen* also have a sighting south," said Topp.

"Probably a pesky British cruiser trying to shadow us," said the Admiral. "Signal *Peter Strasser*. Have them get a couple *Stukas* up to have a look, and let them know we still have a stinger. As for U-456, if he can close, perhaps we can take another bite out of the flock. Good for him. In the meantime, I want all our ships steering 045 and ahead full."

Rhineland trained her guns on the distant silhouette, but at 06:30 they saw the pair of *Stukas* come in and the cruiser itself disappeared over the horizon. Once up at 12,000 feet, the pilots identified the shadow as a British heavy cruiser, and some 15 nautical miles behind it, there was a larger ship, undoubtedly the *Hood*. The news after that was not good. The two *Stukas* dove on the cruiser, but both were hit by flak and went down in the sea. One got a 500 pound bomb off, scored a near miss, but the pilots were still too green to make an effective attack, the British veterans behind those AA guns simply too good that day. The Admiral elected to keep his remaining *Stuka*'s ready, and instead put up fighters to try and find the British carrier. That was the most immediate threat in his mind, and with the long sleepless night passed, he turned the matter over to Böhmer and retired.

* * *

Thus far the British had done a splendid job in defending this valuable convoy. *Hartlebury* was badly damaged, though still seaworthy. It was decided to have that ship return to Reykjavik after the Convoy Master transferred to another vessel. As for the *Richard Bland*, It was dead in the water, its crew taken off by the destroyer *Ashanti*, and then the ship would have to be put down. Destroyer *Ledbury* was gone, and the light cruiser *Newcastle* had sustained enough damage to her boilers to force her to be

detached and sent home to the Faeroes with the destroyer *Leamington*. Everything else was afloat, safe and still on course, and Admiral Holland aboard the *Hood* had maneuvered in such a threatening way that the Germans soon vanished to the east of his position.

The British were wise enough to know what the Germans were doing. Holland was well settled into the Captain's chair on *Hood*, and musing inwardly, zombie thoughts circling in the mind of a man who should be dead now.

They've broken off east, he thought. Precisely what I would do. The question now is whether we should get after them with the two carriers. If we can hound them sufficiently, perhaps they'll throw in the towel and head for a Norwegian port. That would certainly be good, but I think it unlikely, unless we really get lucky and hurt them. Yet we must try and drive them off. Otherwise, they'll make for the North Cape, and then we'll have the real battle on our hands.

Admiral Holland was a very wise man.

* * *

It was work for the carriers now, with each side laboring to improve their situational awareness. *Ark Royal* put up a seaplane and sent it northeast, with two fighters up on CAP. This carrier was leading a bit of a charmed life in this retelling of events. It should have met its fate at the end of a torpedo from U-81 in the Med during a run to support Malta. With that island in German hands, and Crete being supplied more easily from Alexandria, *Ark Royal* was reassigned to the Atlantic, and had spent most of her time in the Faeroes Gap. Now she was the second carrier Tovey had added to this convoy, coming up with *Anson* and *Howe* in the Home Fleet group to make PQ-17 one of the most heavily guarded convoys ever to set sail in the war.

Further north with the distant covering force, *Victorious* also put up a pair of fighters and sent them to keep an eye on the retiring German battlegroup. It was able to identify several ships, but there was no sign of the German carrier until 11:30. The seaplane off *Ark Royal* had just altered course to investigate an unknown ship, and so Fighter 1 off the *Victorious*, having completed its reconnaissance run, was vectored south to join the party. Amazingly, they spotted the carrier alone, without escort of any kind.

German fighters were spotted, high above, slipping in and out of high clouds. The fighter's climbed to look for them, but it was a shadow dance and the contact was lost. Meanwhile, the seaplane off *Ark Royal* confirmed the sighting, and soon both British carriers had the location of the enemy prize.

After damage sustained by that hit the previous day, *Victorious* had only 6 Albacores available for a possible strike, but they were ordered to take off immediately, receiving an escort of three fighters. On *Ark Royal*, there were 12 new planes, the British Buccaneer, which was next in line to replace the Albacore. All 12 were ordered up, with six fighters in escort, also new Fireflies replacing the older Fulmars. During all this time, the Germans had no idea the enemy was shadowing them, until that seaplane loitered just a little too long, and two Bf-109s on CAP spotted it. They swooped in, chasing the plane through one drifting cloud after another, before they finally got their quarry.

Now Böhmer had to assume he had been spotted. Minor engine problems had seen the ship lag behind when the order was given to turn east. Böhmer did not think it important enough to report, and kept on at 15 knots until his engineers sorted the problem out. In the meantime, he had effected a rendezvous with Kurt Hoffmann, glad to have a surface escort again. The dark silhouette of the *Scharnhorst* was a most welcome sight. Yet the four fighters he had up now would be running low on fuel soon, and would have to be relieved. As for the British, while he had a general idea of their location, the morning recon operation sighting reports were already well over an hour old. He could send his *Stukas* out, looking for trouble, but his inclination was to get a good fighter defense up first, which is exactly what he ordered. He had eight 109s still available, and sent them all up, intending to send a few to cover *Tirpitz* to the north. The fighters began taking off, fanning out to the west, and it was Willie Brandt in Number 5 who made the first contact—a group of four enemy planes.

Hans Schiller in Number 7 to the south saw them too as he was climbing through 20,000 feet. They appeared to be coming from the southwest, but a minute after 12:00, another warning came in from the west. Kempf in Number 8 also had contacts, at least five planes. He saw another Messerschmitt streak in to attack, but it was caught in a withering fire from the rear mounted guns on this new plane type. A pair of Vickers K .707 MGs gunned him down, and he made a mental note to swing round and make his

pass from the front of this target.

Over the next 30 minutes, those eight German fighters had to contend with two well coordinated strikes from the British carriers. The sky was suddenly alive with the movement of enemy aircraft. Brandt could see several groups of planes in formation, lower, slower, and obviously looking for trouble. He dove on one group, riddling one plane from above and sending the others scattering to evade. So the British have a new torpedo bomber, he noted. The heavy round nosed lances were evident beneath their fuselages as he climbed after his pass. Then two fighters came swooping in and he quickly banked right, soon finding himself in a heated dogfight.

Those eight German fighters pirouetted about, more maneuverable than anything else in the sky, and their dizzy dance seemed to multiply their numbers in the minds of the British bomber pilots. Two of the three strike groups had been broken up, twos and threes reforming and getting back on their attack heading. The pilots strained to look for targets, squinting at the sea below and still casting wary glances this way and that for German fighters. Then one man called out on the radio—*Skunk at three o'clock!* Lieutenant Commander Robert Everett of 810 Squadron thought they might keep on and find more targets. This looked to be nothing more than a destroyer. He pressed on, but saw nothing but the empty sea. The Germans had turned east some time ago, and by the time the planes got out to the reported location of *Peter Strasser*, the fleet-footed carrier was nowhere to be seen.

If all these angry bees are here, the hive must be somewhere, thought Everett. He kept on, with four wing mates, but saw nothing but that lone destroyer. It soon became a question of better than nothing, and so he took his planes in. That was going to seal the fate of DD *Gunnar* that day. It would dodge four of the five torpedoes after it, but not the one from Lieutenant Commander Everett. He saw the contact explosion, high white spray amidships, and grinned. Now the only carrier he had to find out here was the good 'Old Ark.'

*Admiral Scheer Norwegian Sea, 150 Nautical Miles ENE of Jan
Mayen, June 16, 1942, 18:30 Hours*

Kapitan Theodore Kranke was not happy. He had been given a very

privileged role in this operation, the lead scouting group for the fleet, and he had certainly done that well enough, finding the enemy the previous day. Yet that engagement with a single destroyer and cruiser had been very costly. The sight of his brother ship *Lutzow* careening over like that was most disheartening. A destroyer, a cruiser, and finally a battleship, and that had been the end for *Lutzow*, a most able ship.

Raeder is getting too bold now, he thought. He had another aircraft carrier, and so he thinks he can send the fleet anywhere he pleases. We barely got away from that battleship—a new ship from the looks of it, and fast. If this were 1940, my ship would have little more than a British cruiser to worry about, unless we ran into the *Hood*. Now, most every battleship I’m likely to see in the Norwegian Sea has the speed to get after me, and I can do nothing about that except turn and run.

He shrugged, realizing his ship had been built to fight in 1940, but things were very different now, and *Admiral Scheer* was already obsolete. That was what had just happened to him. After slipping away, leaving *Newcastle*, *Ledbury* and *Lutzow* to their fate, he made a wide circling maneuver west and north around Jan Mayen, using the island itself, wreathed in fog, to mask his position. He had it in mind to then turn northeast and run on a course roughly parallel to the one he expected the convoy to take. Then he could come 30 points to starboard and see if he could take those merchantmen on the flank. The maneuver had been executed perfectly, over a long 24 hour period, and he was approaching the convoy zone again, guns ready, lookouts high on the mainmast, eager for vengeance. There, to his great surprise, was the looming presence of yet another British battleship, heavy on the horizon. He saw the long silhouette begin to compress, and knew that the enemy had turned toward him to give chase.

“Helmsman! Come about, 180 degrees! All ahead flank!”

Turn and run.... It was all he had in his pocket for such an encounter, and he steamed, angry to find himself right back where he was the previous day, running from a British battleship. It was as if a hungry man had just snuck into the kitchen after hours and was caught by a knife wielding cook. He could keep his distance now if he ran full out. The *King George V* class topped out at 28 knots, just like his own ship. As long as he was out of range of those 14-inch guns, he was safe. But if they had a pair of cruisers to harry him as well... *Lutzow*, rolling over into the dark cold sea, and nothing he

could do for those men now. He had many friends on that ship.

So now we play the game again, he thought. How in the world did they know where I was? Could they have picked me up on radar? Was I spotted by a plane we failed to see? It was frustrating, and maddening at the same time. Here in these latitudes it was daylight round the clock in this season. There was no inky black darkness to hide in at night, just the long dull grey smear.

After running an hour, they eventually shook the dark shadow of the battleship and Krancke turned south west, intending to loop around and see about coming at the convoy from behind. It was then that the watchmen sounded the alarm again—ship sighted, only this time it was just what he feared, a pesky destroyer, a ship that had the speed to find him, mark his location on a chart, and stay on his heels. Only time could shake a determined destroyer Captain. Admiral Scheer had very long sea legs and could out last a ship like that. Yet if he turned to engage it, the destroyer could simply make smoke, put on speed, and race away. The worst of it was this—where there was a destroyer, a British cruiser or two were not far behind.

So the battle yesterday jangled their nerves, he thought. They know I'm still out here, and now they have two sightings in the space of an hour, so they also know what I've done with this last maneuver. I have no air cover, and it wouldn't surprise me to see us fighting off an air strike soon. Damn the British. Damn the Royal Navy, they are simply too efficient! Yet it could be worse.... Yes? It could be very much worse. Thus far we have not heard a whisper about naval rocketry, so whatever I encountered up round the Cape in the Kara Sea last year isn't on the prowl.... Yes, it was almost a year ago—Operation Wunderland. I was to go show the flag to the Russians, reconnoiter their bases, harass their shipping, but look what happened to me.

He had been warned, yes, warned about an unseen ship of war by Hoffmann, Kapitan of the *Scharnhorst*.... *"It stuck a fast moving rocket right into Gneisenau's belly. It was astounding, Krancke! You would have to see it to believe it, but I saw the whole thing with my very own eyes, and I will never forget it. This was the same weapon that sunk Sigfrid, and hit Bismarck. We had the heart of the fleet with us, yet this ship forced Lindemann to back off. Now they are sending you? Be careful!"*

Krancke never liked the way Hoffmann said that—now they are sending you? I was in line for a battlecruiser, he thought. I had my eye on *Kaiser Wilhelm*, but they gave that ship to Heinrich. At the very least, I should have

been moved up to *Rhineland* or *Westfalen*, but after Operation Wunderland, I suppose I am lucky they didn't ship me off to Berlin to command a desk. I have never forgotten that experience, the humiliation, the sense of utter helplessness to feel rounds striking this ship from a vessel we could not even see! Raeder was kind enough to give *Admiral Scheer* back to me after we patched it together again, yet the message was clear. Class was again in session, and if I ever expect a higher command, a better ship, then I had better make the next sortie count. Well, here I am, with *Lutzow* in her watery grave, and now an impudent little British destroyer squawking my position to the entire Royal Navy.

They gave me the dirty work this time—slip through, find the convoy, and shadow it north. Yes, we knew there would be destroyers, and possibly cruisers in escort, but nobody said anything about battleships in this close to the merchantmen. They usually hold forth in the covering forces. Remember when Hoffmann handed me those three cigars? I always saved the third one after surviving that encounter in the Kara Sea. Smoke that one if you get back alive, he told me. That's what this will soon become for me, another case of survival.

Part V

North Cape

“The complete or partial destruction of the enemy must be regarded as the sole object of all engagements. . . . Direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration.”

— **Clausewitz**, *On War*

Chapter 13

Admiral Sheer had come about and was running west now, with a destroyer running parallel to her course, about 11 nautical miles to the south. Behind him, he could still feel the impending shadow of that British battleship, and he knew it had also turned in his direction. He was unquestioningly being shown the door, and now he had to decide what to do. He still had sea room to the west, but eventually, he would begin to run into floes of ice. Now he could either repeat his loop to the north, or describe the same maneuver to the south. Either choice would most likely put him well behind the convoy, and that damn destroyer would duly mark it down. So at 18:38 he opened fire with secondary guns in an effort to chase it off. This is what it's like to fight the Royal Navy, he shrugged. The hunter behind me had a big shotgun, and he always hunts with hounds.

The destroyer he was firing at was the *Onslow*, and the bigger German ship succeeded in discouraging its approach. Krancke saw the enemy destroyer making smoke and turning away, but the hunter behind it already had the range on *Scheer*, and the sea around the ship erupted with accurate fire from those 14-inch guns. It was a case of 'pick on someone your own size,' and it didn't take much for Krancke to get the message. His ship was straddled, and one round of the four flung at him by *Howe* struck home, penetrating the hull well forward. It had been a stroke of very bad luck, and speed fell off to 23 knots as the engineers struggled below decks to try and stop the flooding. Now, hobbled by that hit, it was looking to be a very bad day for Krancke, but two things played in his favor.

The first was the smoke that had been laid down by the *Onslow*. It temporarily masked the scene, and Krancke correctly deduced that the British gunners were having difficulty getting the range again. They fired, but found nothing but seawater in the gloom, the shots coming in very wide. The second, unknown to Krancke, was a frantic message that came in from Group B in the merchant sailing order, the very same group that had first suffered the bite of U-376. There were four groups of eight ships each in the convoy, labeled A through D. Down to just six ships, the delay in getting back into cruising order after that attack had seen PQ-17B fall off to the tail of the

convoy column. It was now some 50 nautical miles behind the other three groups, and suddenly under attack again.

Captain Charles Woodhouse aboard the battleship *Howe* got just a fragment of the message before it was cut off. “PQ-17B—*Under attack—on fire—need help with all speed...*” Thinking there might be yet another German surface raider about, Woodhouse reasoned that he could turn now for the merchantmen and still keep his ship between them and the *Admiral Scheer*. But what was out there? He knew the *Tirpitz* and *Scharnhorst* were spotted the previous day. If it was either of those two, things could get very ugly here soon.

As it happened, the Captain had little to fear, and he would have been better minded to send his destroyers back in his place. In turning, he gave Krancke just the brief interval he needed to slip away to the southwest. For it was not the *Tirpitz* feasting on PQ-17B, but yet another unseen marauder in the person of Max Teichert on U-456. While the British had raced after *Admiral Scheer* with three destroyers and a battleship, U-456 had slipped right into the midst of the fold, and torpedoes were soon flying in all directions, ripping into the thin skinned merchant ships and wreaking havoc. Ships were wheeling in all directions, and many of Teichert’s shots missed, but *Olpana*, *Honoumu*, *Rathlin* and *Pan Kraft* would all take hits. The Kapitän was single handedly wrecking what was still left of PQ-17B, the prey Krancke had been maneuvering to get at for so very long.

When word reached *Admiral Scheer*, it came with mixed emotions for Krancke. Here I spend the better part of two days trying to get at the tail of that convoy, while Teichert slips right into the kitchen unnoticed and has himself a feast! *Admiral Scheer* does all the work, harried by battleships and destroyers of every stripe, and I’ve a nice little scar on the hull to prove it, but U-456 gets the laurels. My engineers are still pumping water, but I’m getting speed up again, and the range is opening. Thank God—that battleship is turning to the east.

He would later learn that the destroyer failed to return to a friendly port, and that would be his only consolation. Indeed, HMS *Onslow* would not survive the night. The ship was not making smoke willfully, it had been struck twice by those 11-inch guns from *Admiral Scheer*, and the fires were soon uncontrollable. The ship sunk at 23:30, the lone tally for the German raider, and the salt in the wound was that Krancke didn’t even know he had

done even that.

He turned, chastened by his enemy again, and skulked away to the southwest, but his little drama had done one thing that would make a very big difference in the battle. It had force the British to detach the battleship *Howe* from the Home Fleet covering force, and now it was here, 40 miles behind the tail of the convoy chasing the smoky grey raider, while far to the north, the vanguard of a long procession of British ships was finally approaching the Cape.

All hell was about to break loose.

* * *

Captain Harold Richard George Kinahan was an Irishman through and through. Born in *Belfast* in 1893, he had just celebrated his 49th Birthday eleven days earlier as he prepared to join Home Fleet for one of the first major sorties of the war for his ship, the new battleship *Anson*. Kinahan had served on the staff of Home Fleet since 1940, and this was his second command at sea after a stint on the cruiser *Orion* before the war. A specialist in gunnery, he was about to be taught another lesson in that regard—from the battleship *Tirpitz*.

After the air strike earlier that day, it seemed that the Royal Navy had the enemy on the run. While they had failed to find the German carrier, and sunk only a lowly destroyer, the effect seemed to be that the Germans were now running east for the safety of land based air power. But appearances can be deceiving, for the early evening had also seen a well coordinated air strike aimed at the British carriers.

Home Fleet, with *Anson*, *Ark Royal*, *Sheffield*, *Nigeria*, *Jamaica*, and a hand full of destroyers, had been the farthest east, coming up from Scapa Flow. The assigned distant covering force was west with *Victorious*, *Hood*, *Cumberland*, *Shropshire* and more destroyers. As the two covering forces pressed on north, it was Home Fleet that was suddenly in the vanguard, and *Anson* seemed to be driving the Germans on before him. Their afternoon air strike had cost them seven *Stukas*, and but all it took was one good hit with a 500 pound bomb to severely ruffle *Ark Royal*'s feathers. To make matters worse, a group of He-111s had also flown from Tromso carrying 1000 pound bombs, and both arms of the strike caught the British unawares.

There were six fighters up near *Ark Royal*, but no visual sightings were made until the *Stukas* were only ten miles out. By then it was almost too late for the fighters to break up the attack. They came in, paid a heavy price in losing seven of the twelve planes that made the attack, but they got that single hit, and couple near misses. The resulting damage to planes parked all over the rear flight deck was considerable. When the skies finally cleared, *Ark Royal* had only 3 more fighters and a half dozen Barracudas left in mission ready order, and one of the four fighters she had up was shot down in a duel with the six German Messerschmitts that escorted the strike.

That was the first setback, a turn of fate that took out almost 40% of British sea based air power in one throw. *Ark Royal* was ordered to withdraw to a secondary role, where she might get some time to repair many of those damaged planes. For a time, *Anson* was then the only credible threat in that advanced covering force, and as if they could sense their enemies weakness at that moment, Admiral Carls decided to make a sudden turn. He had collected the disparate squadrons of his fleet as they approached the Norwegian coast, and now, he came about, guns ready, hoping to follow up that air strike with a surprise surface engagement.

At 30 minutes past midnight he spotted the tall silhouette of the *Anson*, more prominent than any other ship on his horizon, and *Tirpitz* opened fire. Fifteen minutes later, he scored a particularly telling blow, one that struck *Anson* amidships, penetrating to the engineering powerplant below decks.

Kinahan cursed inwardly when he felt the blow shake his brand new battleship. Nothing like scuffing up the pain the first time out of port, he thought. But that was the least of it. The loss of speed in an engagement like this was more than a tactical inconvenience—it could be fatal. *Anson* fired back bravely, and saw the bright flashes of at least two hits on *Tirpitz*. That gave Kinahan heart, the first bite for his ship in the war, and the first taste of blood.

The German ship took light damage, with a twin 152mm gun turret put out of action, one flak gun lost, but more significantly, the surface search radar was a total loss, flayed by shrapnel from the hit on that secondary battery.

Anson's damage was equivalent, with a hit on one of her 5.25-inch secondary batteries, but the difficulties in the propulsion plant at this critical moment were a grave concern for Kinahan. More German ships were spotted,

and now he realized there was grave danger here. He turned to his Executive Officer and whispered something quietly, so the other officers on the bridge would not overhear him. “Where is *Hood*? We need her—and that quickly.” Then he turned calmly to his helmsman and ordered the ship to come about.

Where was *Hood*?

She was 123 nautical miles away, slightly northwest of the *Anson*, returning to her watch with the carrier *Victorious*. The carrier was actually closer to the battle, some 97 miles off on that same heading, and with her were the heavy cruisers *Kent* and *Cumberland*. *Nigeria* and *Jamaica* were also slowly converging on the carrier’s position, but all these ships were now too far off to be of any immediate help to Kinahan on the *Anson*. After getting a fleet status update, the Captain leaned over the chart table with a decision to make.

Laddie, he said to himself inwardly. We’ve a gimpy leg now, and we cannot run. No use holding the destroyers and *Sheffield* here, but it looks as though we’ll simply have to stand and fight. “signal all destroyers to take a heading of 340, *Sheffield* to follow,” said Kinahan. “Step lively now, and run it up on the halyards.”

The destroyers were already running, with the *Marne* taking a pounding from the *Admiral Hipper* and what looked like another smaller cruiser coming up from the south. If Kinahan actually knew what he was now facing, he might have put his money on the engineers getting the engines sorted out, and not on his guns. The entire German surface fleet had reached a predetermined rendezvous point, and now they had turned, forming a wide line of steel on the sea, and they were charging west. One of the two Type 275 radar sets had been smashed aboard *Anson*, and so she was like a fighter with one eye closed, and could not see the danger looming from the east. Then the ship shuddered heavily, another hard blow struck by two rounds from the *Tirpitz*. This time fires and flooding resulted. A 5.25-inch turret magazine had exploded.

The fires were not serious, but the flooding was. That round from *Tirpitz* that had penetrated to the engineering plant had opened a good sized hole in the hull, and the ship was soon in a ten degree list. Kinahan counter flooded, but this did nothing to help his situation with the engines. *Anson* merely settled more deeply in the water, and he could make no more than 8 knots.

Anson fired another full broadside, the tall spray of the shells straddling

the dark silhouette of the *Tirpitz* in the distance. He saw no obvious hits, but suddenly the lookouts reported the Germans seemed to be breaking off to the north, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

They've got that one good ship up here, he thought. Perhaps they have orders not to mix it up with our battleships, but from the looks of this encounter, we've taken the worst of it. In spite of that, there's at least hope that we can control that flooding and get the ship west to rejoin Holland and the *Hood*.

There the British had been pulling together all the elements of the distant covering force, the carrier *Victorious* with three destroyers and cruisers *Kent* and *Cumberland*. *Jamaica* coming up from the southwest, just a little east of *Hood*'s position now, and *Nigeria* bringing up the rear to the west.

Kinahan had it in mind to try and limp back to join them, but he realized the situation with his propulsion system was going from bad to worse by the minute. No Captain ever wants to consider what was on his mind now—the fate of his crew of over 1500 men in the cold water. If he could just keep the ship afloat, he could spare them that fate. The engineers reported that they had finally managed to seal off the flooded compartments below, though the gash in the hull could not be repaired at sea.

That was the game insofar as *Anson* was concerned. With her speed down to 8 knots, the ship was useless as any part of the distant covering force. He might limp west to stand with the merchantmen, as 8 knots was their cruising speed, but when he reported his ship's condition to Holland and Scapa Flow, the order that came back was not unexpected. He looked at it, blinked, and clenched his jaw. '*HMS Anson is to avoid any further contact with the enemy and immediately withdraw to Scapa Flow.*'

So much for our maiden voyage, he thought grimly. It's back to the dry docks for us now.

Chapter 14

The problem Holland had now, was the dispersion of his force in fending off these initial challenges from the Kriegsmarine. With *Anson* ordered home, he now had only two battleships forward, his own ship and the American battleship *Massachusetts* with the close covering force. *Howe* was still at the tail of the convoy keeping an eye out for that German pocket battleship, and that was 300 nautical miles to his southwest. *Arc Royal* was also retiring towards the convoy, though that ship still had 11 planes operational.

The only thing to do was to consolidate the force he had, bring up the close covering force to combine his forces into one strong battlegroup. *Victorious* sent up a fighter to have a look around, and soon reported where at least a part of the enemy force had gone. The plane overflew what looked like a pair of fast heavy cruisers, but to Holland's mind they had to be something more.

“Heavy Cruisers? *Hipper* is the only ship that's been up here of late. No. That has to be those two fast battlecruisers, *Rhineland* and *Westfalen*—nothing to be trifled with, though he was confident he could back those ships off if it came to an engagement. No enemy planes had been seen aloft, and so thinking he had a slight edge with *Victorious* on the scene, he gathered his ships and steeled himself for the confrontation that lay ahead.

Unknown to him, a Korvettenkapitan with a famous name was lurking right in the midst of his task force. Karl Brandenburg had taken U-457 in from the north, and sailed right through the heart of the British force at periscope depth. He was one of the boats in this North Cape group that was loosely organized as *Wolfstrudel Eisteufel*, the “Ice Devils.” At one point he lined up on the *Hood*, elated at the thought that he might get off a shot, but the speedy battleship was simply too fast. He was able to ascertain several ships by type and silhouette, identifying *Kent* and *Cumberland*, with four other ships, mostly destroyers. That dampened his ardor for a torpedo attack, but he lurked about, undiscovered, and then continued south to get to a safer position to key off a report to Admiral Carls on the *Tirpitz*.

His intelligence gave the Germans a very good idea of what they were up against, and Carls, already confident in having beaten off the threat from

Anson, decided to attack.

“Let’s see how much stomach they have,” he said to Kapitan Topp. “They hardly put a scratch on us in that last engagement, but I think we hurt that battleship. We will swing slightly north, consolidate, and then move west again.”

Peter Strasser was about 80 miles to the south, but with only five Ju-87s and six Messerschmitts remaining operational. He decided to commit those planes, hoping one of those *Stuka* pilots might get a lucky hit. If nothing else, the six Bf-109s up for air cover would do him some good.

The *Stukas* lined up on the deck, taking off in the wet windblown sea spray. They did not have far to go before spotting the leading British ship, clearly a cruiser, and then seeing the much more menacing *Hood* not far behind. They put in their attack, prompting heavy AA fire from *Hood* and *Jamaica*, but the best they could do was get several near misses on the battleship. One enterprising pilot interpreted his bomb as having scored a hit off the starboard bow, but it was merely the close underwater explosion that gave him more to see than actual damage to report.

More valuable to Admiral Carls was the information those planes obtained on the composition of the enemy force. He now knew that he was facing the *Hood* with three cruisers, and followed by two more cruisers and two destroyers. The presence of enemy fighters harassing and driving off the last of those *Stukas* also told him a British carrier was still close at hand. Against this force of eight enemy ships he had an equal number, and the scene was now set for what might be the decisive battle in the north. If he could prevail here, stop or savage this convoy, then he might close the sea lanes to Murmansk, choking off the only viable supply route to the Soviets. He gave immediate orders to begin the engagement, with the super heavy cruiser *Westfalen* engaging the lead enemy ship, and *Tirpitz* to fire on the *Hood* as soon as range permitted.

* * *

Aboard *Hood*, they received the sighting report from *Sheffield* at 05:53 in the morning, the 17th of June—*One German battleship, course 270, range 10 nautical miles*. That was over 20,000 yards, and both sides were closing on one another at high speed. Captain Arthur Wesley Clark was on *Sheffield*,

and minutes later the watchman called out three more sightings, believed to be enemy heavy cruisers. His position in the vanguard was now feeling just a bit uncomfortable, and when the ship suddenly took a direct hit from a 5-inch gun off the *Westfalen*, he ordered a quick evasive turn, hard to starboard. That hit had already knocked out one of his own secondary 4-inch twin gun mounts and a 40mm Bofors. He ordered all guns to return fire, and turned.

The ship would not come out of that turn unscathed. German fire was exceptionally accurate, rocking ‘Shiny Shef’ with four more hits that damaged one of her 6-inch guns, several more Bofors mounts, and the 533mm torpedo mounts on the port side, where a fire looked particularly threatening. The ship’s Huff Duff directional finding antennae was clawed by shrapnel, but the worst of it was a round that penetrated the forward hull, causing substantial flooding and immediate loss of speed.

Yet *Hood* and the heavy cruiser *Kent* had the range now, and began pouring on fire. The dark form of the lead German ship was unmistakable, the *Tirpitz*. Holland sat in the Captain’s chair, a sudden queasy feeling coming over him. He had already faced this ship once before, and under the withering assault of *Stukas* that seriously damaged his ship. But there was something more, an unaccountable feeling of presentiment clawing at him now. It was as if he could somehow sense that his fate had been decided in a very similar duel at sea against a ship in this class, the *Bismarck*. It was an unreasonable fear, but he could feel it nonetheless, a coldness in his chest, a sense that doom was nigh at hand.

Then *Kent* laid down a beautiful straddle of the German ship with her 8-inch guns and one of them got lucky. The range was about 20,000 yards, at the outer limit of what her guns could make. The sighting had been perfect, with calm seas, clear skies, and the wind fallen off to near zero. At that range, the plunging angle of fire was enough to penetrate the aft deck armor, and the resulting explosion below decks did serious damage to the main propulsion conduits when a secondary magazine went up as part of the bargain. It was a critical hit, most unexpected, certainly unlooked for given the toughness of a ship like *Tirpitz* at sea. But damage to propulsion meant sudden loss of speed, and that could be fatal.

It was some minutes before Captain Topp got the bad news, the main turbines were seriously damaged, and within minutes the ship would be dead in the water... And *Hood* had the range. *Westfalen* and *Rhineland* could see

the big battleship slowing, and knew there was trouble. They immediately began to concentrate fire on *Kent*, hoping to take that ship out of the fight quickly. Added to the fire by *Tirpitz*, which was still engaging both *Kent* and *Hood*, the British cruiser was soon awash in tall geysers from shellfall.

A serious fire amidships was enough to prompt Captain Angus Graham to come about and attempt to withdraw to the northwest. He had put in his magic hit aft on *Tirpitz*, but now he was taking serious damage, with the fires expanding and difficult to control. He soon found that he could make no more than 8 knots, limping away from the fight, as was *Sheffield*. That cruiser had recovered speed to 14 knots, controlled her fires, and was now moving due west

Holland could see what the Germans were trying to do. *Tirpitz* had lost propulsion, and the three other German heavy ships were now moving rapidly to positions where they could cover that ship and aid its withdrawal. In the meantime, there was nothing wrong with those 15-inch guns on *Tirpitz*, and added to the 11-inch guns of *Scharnhorst* and those of the other German ships, Holland decided he would do better here to maneuver with those cruisers to the west. The action ended at little before 06:00, with the Germans clustering around their stricken battleship, and the British falling off to the west. There would come *Cumberland* and *Nigeria*, and Holland had a mind to reconstitute his covering force, and possibly effect a rendezvous with the Americans.

Captain Topp was lucky in that. It was reported that the damage to the propulsion shaft was so bad, that the ship would have to be towed. Admiral Carls ordered *Scharnhorst* to do the job, with the two heavy cruisers on either flank. Destroyers *Grimhild*, *Gondul*, and *Odin* were hovering as a screen. The cruisers *Hipper* and *Koenig* brought up the rear, and the entire formation lumbered off at 5 knots as *Scharnhorst* labored to get his stricken charge to safe water. A flight of five Me-109s off *Peter Strasser* were overhead for added protection, but both sides had had enough that day. Now it would be up to the U-Boats and German land based planes in the next layer of the defense.

It was then that the freighter *Hartlebury* radioed that it was under fire from what looked like a German heavy cruiser. That ship had been detached from PQ-17B, and ordered back to Iceland, but it would never get there. That 'cruiser' was the *Admiral Scheer*, and Krancke finally had some solace for

his lot in life, notching his belt with yet another merchantman. But he was still missing the *Lutzow*, and that wound festered.

* * *

At 11:06 local time on the 17th, spotters aboard *Hood* detected a periscope wake. The formation had been slowly assembling and preparing to move north to meet the American close covering force, but Holland immediately ordered *Hood* ahead full and into an evasive zig-zag course to the east. Destroyer *Meteor* was closest to the scene, and it went to flank speed, its sonar actively pinging out a warning as it searched. Both *Kent* and *Sheffield* were detached, heading south to join the wounded destroyer *Marne* en-route to Scapa Flow. They would make easy prey to any lurking U-boat. Low on fuel, minesweeper *Halcyon* was also detached to join them.

The boat was U-251 under Kapitan Heinrich Timm, a cautious commander who never shirked from a combat opportunity, but one who valued his boat and the lives of his crew as well. He heard that destroyer pinging, and the rapid churn of its screws, and immediately dove deep, altering course to 218. His Sonarman heard the destroyer sweep by behind him, and then Timm came around to 308, intending to try and get behind the covering forces where the real meat was. He knew he would have to surface again soon to recharge his battery, so the last thing he needed now was a bothersome destroyer. This was the beginning of the next phase of the game, for the Ice Devils were still out there, in a widely dispersed wolfpack.

One of his brothers, U-457, was only about 18 nautical miles to the south, and its Kapitan, Karl Brandenburg, was fortunate to be right in the path of those detaching British cruisers. *Sheffield* was making 14 knots, so he let that ship pass. *Kent* was limping along at just 8 knots, a perfect target, and he began to slowly maneuver into position, moving to periscope depth. It was then that he spotted a destroyer, but after watching it cautiously for some time, he determined it, too, was moving very slowly. There was no active sonar, and so after lining up on an intercept course for the British cruiser, he dove shallow, retracting his periscope to avoid any chance of it being spotted. It was going to be very close.

The destroyer suddenly increased speed and turned, making a high speed run, its sonar starting to ping. It was a complete bluff, for the ship was a minesweeper, with no ASW depth charges aboard at that time. Yet her

Captain, Collin Singleton, was determined, immediately executing another turn, and ordering his deck guns to fire at the water. He wanted to add the sound of those rounds exploding to his screw noise, and see if he couldn't frighten this U-boat off. It worked.

Rattled by those explosions, Brandenburg went deeper, just over the layer, but his speed at that depth was no more than 4 knots on battery power. He executed a ten point turn, adjusting to 185 south, and running as quietly as possible. He could hear the enemy ship right on top of him, wincing inwardly, but no depth charges fell. Again it turned, hunting him very skillfully. The sound of the screws slowed considerably, as if the ship was trying to match his speed. *Halcyon* was right on top of him, but no attack came. Then he heard yet more explosions from above, thanking his stars that he had chosen to go deep.

In desperation, Brandenburg decided survival was preferable to a hit on that cruiser, and quietly gave the order to come about. He turned northeast, intent on joining his brethren, U-251, U-255, and now U-703 slowly arriving from the east. Their mission was to stop the convoy, and now he would forsake these straggling elements of the enemy covering force. Singleton's bluff had just saved the heavy cruiser *Kent*, though he would not really know that, nor would he get any medals for his skillful attack on the unseen submarine. For him it was all in a day's work.

* * *

At 13:00, a Kondor departed Tromso, heading northwest to see about finding the enemy convoy so it could vector those U-boats in. *Peter Strasser*, now heading south for Tromso, also sent up a pair of fighters to provide protection. They flew right over *Sheffield* and *Kent*, noting their positions but continuing on west to look for the real fish. The Kondor was already getting long range radar returns, turning to investigate, even as those fighters did the same.

The Bf-109s took a good look, classifying the contact as a battleship. The second pass, now receiving flak, gave them a better look. It was A *King George V* class ship, completely alone. They had come across the battleship *Howe*, returning to the covering force after its duel with the pocket battleships.

By 15:30, that Kondor had finally scored the jackpot, reporting two large

formations of merchant ships escorted by three destroyers. Most of the Ice Devils were too far away to do anything about it, except U-255 under Kapitanleutnant Reinhart Reche. He was only about 16 miles away, and cleverly maneuvering his boat into a gap between the lead group of enemy ships and the two groups following. At about 18:40, he began to line up on the freighter *Azerbaijan*, and no one in the convoy saw the sleek eel in the water ahead. Once his first torpedo was in the water, the alarm was raised, but he was already calculating how to get at the ships following in the long line.

Bellingham was next, then *Bolton Castle*. He missed the first, and his next lance raced right past that second ship only to strike the next vessel in the line, the *Daniel Morgan*. He was right in the midst of the formation, with ships on either side of him now, a wolf in the fold. He would turn easily and put out a full spread of four torpedoes, that last striking the *Grey Ranger*. Racing on, the sea spray awash at his bow, eyes lost in his field glasses, Reche fired a single fish at the next ship in the line, the *Hoosier*. It was only now that he began to receive fire from the merchantmen. *Grey Ranger*, hit badly with both flooding and fire scourging her decks, managed to get a 20mm Oerklion into action and began riddling the seas around the U-boat. Reluctantly, Reche gave the order to dive to periscope depth to avoid damage or casualties to his men on the sail.

The feast had begun, and all the drama and hand wringing of the surface action counted for naught. The heavy ships with their thunderous guns would not weigh in on this little battle. It was just a single U-boat, reveling in the midst of those merchant ships, and the torment of PQ-17 was only just beginning. Yet out on the glowering grey to the south, three British destroyers had seen the explosions, particularly when *Hoosier* was finally hit. *Ashanti*, *Martin* and *Onslaught* were racing to the scene as fast as their screws would turn. Reche would notch three kills, with *Daniel Morgan* and *Hoosier* still afloat and burning, near dead in the water, but his joyride through the convoy would soon come to a most unhappy end.

Chapter 15

Kapitan Krancke was still not satisfied, but things were getting a little better. After sinking the *Hartlebury*, he had turned to stalk the Allied convoy again from behind, coming upon yet another straggler, the *Honomu*. He wasted little time, engaging and sinking that ship with his 152mm guns. Yet the wireless operator had gotten off a distress call, warning that the German raider was back in the hunt, which now posed a real problem for the covering forces, just over 150 nautical miles to the east. There was nothing to be done in the short run, but *Hood* abandoned its planned rendezvous, and Holland decided to take his entire group west to investigate.

In the meantime, the German surface group had passed on south, with *Scharnhorst* slowly towing the *Tirpitz* under good German air cover. Admiral Carls decided he could then detach his fast raiders, and sent *Rhineland* and *Westfalen* northwest. Two groups of Heinkels had sortied from Tromsø an hour earlier, vectored in to the location of the convoy by Reche's boat before it went missing. There they found and bombed the *Winston Salem*, which exploded spectacularly when its cargo of ammunition was set off by an 800 pound bomb. That ship would sink in short order, and though two of the six Heinkels were shot down, the remaining four headed home, surprised to find ships beneath them as they approached the Norwegian coast. They had found the British cruisers detached earlier, and now cruising about 130 miles off the coast.

This sighting led to the sortie of yet another Kondor to keep an eye on them and fix their position, and when Kapitan Böhmer on the *Peter Strasser* learned their location, he decided to do something about it with his last six *Stukas*. They were up in short order, heading southwest where they were vectored in by the Kondor.

The restless Captain of *Sheffield*, Wesley Clark, was getting quite uncomfortable with all these German planes overflying his position, and no friendly air cover in sight. He put in a coded message to the *Ark Royal*, complaining, and was soon told a pair of Fireflies were on the way... but they would arrive too late.

Those six *Stukas* found the wounded warriors, and focused their attack on

Kent, each with a pair of 500 pound bombs. With *Kent* slowed to 8 knots, unable to maneuver, four of the twelve bombs would score hits, with another near miss only 20 feet off the port side. That was going to end the war for that ship, and the doughty cruiser went down at a few minutes before midnight on the end of that very long day's action.

Clark stared at it, knowing he could not linger here, but seeing the men in the water, and realizing he had to do what he could to help them. But the trouble was only just beginning. Those two German raiders detached by Admiral Carls had sallied forth at good speed, just passing the British group in the murky grey. They spotted *Sheffield*, turned on a parallel course, angling in to close the range, which was about 27,000 meters at first sighting.

The British cruiser soon had to abandon its rescue effort and put on all speed to make a run for it. Undaunted, the plucky minesweeper *Halcyon* would brave the enemy charge turning to fire with everything it had. It was a brave action, hoping to give *Sheffield* time to break away, but this time, Captain Singleton's bluff would be called by the secondary guns of the *Westfalen*. His ship would take numerous hits, and was soon lost in the smoke they were trying to make, but would never be seen again.

The combined fire of those two raiders was going to also put an end to *Sheffield's* war, and the last hapless destroyer on that ill-fated group would die with her, the *Marne*. Captain Clark and *Sheffield* that had led the engagement the previous day, fighting bravely with *Kent* at her back. That cruiser had done what no man among them thought possible—it had stopped *Tirpitz* near dead in the water with that lucky hit. Now the two German raiders had their revenge, and Admiral Carl's smiled when he got the news: "*Sunk all ships in contacted group. Our compliments to the Admiral. Continuing on planned route.*"

When Holland got the news he clenched his fist. They were still just over 90 miles to the northeast, and too late to intervene. But he had a good idea where the German raiders were going now, angry at himself for not anticipating what the enemy had just pulled here.

Damn their shadows, he thought. They broke off and ran for the coast under their land based air power. When I moved north to look for the Americans, they snookered me, running south along the Norwegian coast and then turning out to sea again. But I know where they're going now, don't I. Yes, and I'm a good deal closer to the main body of PQ-17 than they are, so

let them come. They'll find me waiting there with *Hood* if they get bold enough to approach. Then we'll see them pay for what they did to *Sheffield* and *Kent*. Yes....

* * *

Krancke was pacing on the bridge of the *Admiral Scheer*. Ahead of him lay the entire British convoy, and here were a pair of impudent destroyers thinking to try and stop him. The action had started five minutes ago, hot and furious, with the sharp report of the 152mm secondary batteries resounding with each rapid salvo. He would show them what they were dealing with, and shook his head as they bravely dodged and maneuvered to get after him. But his gunners were too good. He would get them both, two more trophies to set on the shelf in payment for *Lutzow*, but they would be very valuable kills, destroyers *Martin* and *Onslaught*.

As he approached the convoy from behind, he had already left the *Winston Salem* burning in his wake, damaged the boilers on *William Hooper* and set that ship on fire, but he had paid a price. The destroyers had put damage on his own engines, and the engineers were frantically trying to get it repaired. In that interval, his speed fell off to six knots, and he clenched his jaw, seeing the hulking merchant ships ahead actually slipping away.

"Come on!" he shouted down the voice tube. "Get those engines turning over!"

It was a long twenty minutes before he could work up to 14 knots again, and he steered north to run parallel to the convoy where he could pick them off at his leisure. Those 14 knots were just going to be good enough to give him that position, and now he could even bring his torpedo tubes to bear.

"Let's put a nice straight runner into that ship there," he pointed, and minutes later that is what he did—the *Troubadour* would sing its swan song that hour, her hull blasted open by that torpedo. He smiled at that, the smell of the kill in the air. There he was, single handedly doing what *Tirpitz* and all the others had set out to do. He could see five more ships in this group, and four more eight miles ahead. He could run right alongside their formation, gunning them down. But his plans were to be interrupted by yet another British destroyer, charging in from the south all guns blazing, the *Oribi*.

Thinking he would deal with this ship as easily as he had dispatched the

last two, he was shocked when the enemy got in the first telling blows. “What are you doing?” he shouted at his chief gunnery officer. “You let them strike us like this? Get after that ship!”

Admiral Sheer rocked again, with yet another hit, and now it seemed that almost all the secondary batteries on the starboard side of the ship had been put out of action. Some had light damage, some heavy, but none could return that fire. *Oribi* was even putting hits on his aft main turret, guns he would not normally use against a small, fast moving target like this.

The man racing about like a wild banshee on *Oribi* was Captain John Edwin Home McBeath. Educated in South Africa, he had come to the Royal Navy as a 23 year old Boatswain’s Mate in 1928. Now a Captain of 37 years, he had learned the fate of *Martin* and *Onslaught*, and was determined to cut off a pound of flesh from the enemy. Elated when he got those first hits, he swung about, making a high speed turn at near 36 knots, his forward batteries continuing to fire. Like an angry bees stinging a bear cub, he was putting so much damage on the superstructure of *Admiral Scheer* that Kapitän Krancke cursed aloud, then ordered a 15 point turn to the north, and all speed possible.

Amazingly, the *Oribi* had driven off the German raider to lick its wounds and see if they could get those secondary batteries back in order. Then, realizing that the convoy was also being stalked by enemy U-boats, McBeath came about, not wanting to press his luck when he had the enemy on the run. He steered the ship south, and then a watchman spotted a periscope, very near the stricken merchant ship *John Witherspoon*. It looked as though the U-boat was diving deeper, intending to get right under the ship it had just torpedoed, and that was exactly what Kapitän Brandenburg was up to. It would not work—not with *Oribi* fired up and racing in for blood. Another explosion resounded to the northeast, where *Bolton Castle* was being hunted by Kapitän Timm on U-251.

“Come on lads!” shouted McBeath. “Let’s get the bloody devils before they sink the whole lot!”

He would.

Oribi made a perfect ASW run, heedless of the risk to *John Witherspoon*, which was a doomed ship in any case. McBeath dropped numerous depth charges, shaking U-457 from stem to stern, until a bad leak started in the engine room, then another, and a third on the bridge. Flooding badly, Brandenburg had no choice but to surface, and when he did, *Oribi* was

waiting for him.

Just when it seemed that the defense was collapsing and the convoy would be ripped apart, this single British destroyer had pressed such a gallant and persistent attack that *Oribi* would drive off *Scheer* and sink U-457. A DSO was in order for McBeath, and one day, well after this war, they would place thick gold stripes on his cuff, call him "Admiral."

A lull settled over the action, the oil thick on the sea, the fires licking at it, and the men in the water rolling over with their suffering, the cold stopping their breath. Some died in those flames, others died from the frigid chill of the water. The group now under attack was an amalgam of PQ-17C and 17D. There had been 16 ships between them, but now there were only eight still underway. Among the stricken ships were *Bolton Castle*, *Daniel Morgan*, *Grey Ranger*, *Hoosier*, *William Hooper*, *Winston Salem*, *Troubadour*, and finally *John Witherspoon*. The stragglers *Hartlebury* and *Honomu* had also died that day, along with *Kent*, *Sheffield*, and three destroyers, *Martin*, *Onslaught*, *Marne*. The minesweeper *Halcyon*, her final bluff called, was also never seen again.

It was as black a day as there had ever been in the war at sea, save the terrible losses off Fuerteventura. Added to these was the fact that *Anson* had also been forced to retire, but so had *Tirpitz*. With all those supply ships weighing heavily on the scales, the Admiralty was chilled to the bone when the day's report came in, Admiral Pound excused himself from the conference table, retired to his private office, and locked the door. That would not spare him from receiving the final report on PQ-17. Of the 32 ships that had set out to make that dangerous run, only six would eventually make a Russian port with their cargo intact. What the German surface raiders had failed to destroy, was left for the planes out of Tromso, Petsamo and Kirkenes. The damage was so grave that the British immediately cancelled PQ-18, and all further Murmansk convoys for the foreseeable future.

* * *

Another man contemplated the day aboard the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst*, Kurt Hoffmann. He was on the aft weather deck off the bridge, smoking a cigar as he often did, and thinking things over. Now he stood there, leaning on the gunwale and watching the wide dark shape of *Tirpitz* in

his wake.

Topp and the Admiral must be fit to be tied, he thought. Who would have thought I'd be towing *Tirpitz* home like this? We've also lost *Lutzow*, and more than one U-boat won't be coming home. Yet there's one consolation we take from this—not a single naval rocket was fired in all these engagements—not one. So the latest rumors on that demon we faced last year must be true. It's gone to Murmansk, and from there to the Pacific. The damn thing was a Russian ship all along, and not British at all! But what was it doing there, sinking its teeth into us before Hitler even invaded the Soviet Union last year, fighting us in the Atlantic as well? That was the ship that got our tanker, the same ship that chased Krancke and *Admiral Scheer* out of the Kara sea.

Well... While the cat is away....

I'm told Krancke is getting a few kills today, feasting on the herd while I'm stuck here towing the mighty *Tirpitz*. Raeder will be none too happy to hear about this. Yet considering the situation, it will make my ship the best surface combatant in the northern fleet. Where will they plant the flag the next time we go out, on *Scharnhorst* or *Peter Strasser*? I'd just as soon give the honor to the carrier. The last thing I need is a troublesome Admiral aboard.

He took another long drag on his cigar. Things could be worse, he thought, far worse. So back to Nordstern we go, where *Tirpitz* will likely sit in the new dry dock they've built there for a good long while. Who knows, perhaps the British will think twice about these convoy runs to Murmansk after we've finished with this one. *Rhineland* and *Westfalen* were the lucky ones. They got cut loose to do some hunting while I play footman to that battleship. But one day I'll get my chance, and with no damn naval rockets in the mix.

However, with my luck, I'll probably run into the *Hood*. He smiled, grimly, not knowing then just how much of a prediction he had just made. Time had a way of balancing her books, and she was thinking... thinking....

Part VI

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“The two worst strategic mistakes to make are acting prematurely and letting an opportunity slip...”

— Paul Coelho

Chapter 16

All through the spring of 1942, the Allies were possessed with the decision of what they could do that year, if anything, to open a Second Front. Roosevelt was particularly keen to see US troops involved in the war that year, and against the Germans as a top priority. Marshall and many other Joint Chiefs wanted action on the European continent as soon as possible, and they were betting on one of two plans associated with the operation already underway to build up forces in the UK—BOLERO—yet the plans kept getting tangled in negotiations, and never seemed to get any traction.

The problem, from the point of view of men like General George Marshall and Admiral King, was not the enemy, but the Allies involved. In spite of Churchill's eagerness for a second front, the British seemed adamantly opposed to both plans teed up by the Americans. The first was called SLEDGEHAMMER, a plan to seize either Brest or Cherbourg in the summer of 1942, but when it came to Montgomery's attention, he quickly called it an "unsound operation of war." He picked the plan apart, declaring the five brigade frontage too narrow, leading to insufficient power in the assault, and slow buildup of forces after. Beyond that, it was simply too soon to contemplate such an attack. There were not enough landing craft to support it.

Marshall was sent by Roosevelt to hammer with that sledgehammer on the British, and see what the problem was. Along the way he opted to forego a meeting with Churchill at his private residence in Chequers, much to the chagrin of Churchill himself. Roosevelt's close civilian advisor, Harry Hopkins, was sent instead, and he got a tirade from Churchill on protocol.

"Where is this General Marshall?" said the Prime Minister, puffing about his sitting room with a cigar in one hand, and a book of British law in another, which he was reading loudly from as he went. He asserted his position at the very top of the chain of command in Great Britain, the single authority that all his Admirals and Generals answered to, and then he ripped the relevant passage right out of the book and threw it on the floor.

"If this General of yours would care to read it, there it is," he said with a huff. Hopkins listened until Churchill had fired his broadside, then closed the range to engage himself.

“Mister Prime Minister, you know damn well that this is nothing more than an effort to throw too much salt in the stew concerning Sledgehammer.”

“I wouldn’t waste my breath on such,” said Churchill with just the right level of indignation in his tone. “The truth is, Mister Hopkins, the decision making authority on this side of the pond resides here, in me, and you had better realize it. If your General Marshall thinks he can bypass me as easily as he diverted his train this morning to bypass Chequers, he is sorely mistaken. Now then, aside from the fact that Sledgehammer would be primarily a British Operation, it is entirely premature. It is our belief that it would have little chance of success, easily bottled up by the Germans, and leave all of Spain and Vichy France unscathed. The enemy would still hold Gibraltar, all of North Africa, and it would do nothing to directly challenge their current operations in the Canary Islands, or put any pressure on Rommel. Our Generals will tell you the very same thing, but I can assure you, they heard it from me first and foremost.”

He began reading from another passage in his law book, establishing responsibility for overall strategy and war aims in the office of the Prime Minister, whereupon he ripped that page out as well and threw it in Hopkins’ lap. Then a mood fell over him, and his eyes seemed to be seeing things far ahead, distant things to come, and there was both fear and anticipation in his gaze.

“Mister Hopkins, we want a Mediterranean strategy—I want such a strategy, and the British Empire answers to my thinking on this matter. Gibraltar must be retaken, and the Eastern Med reopened.”

“Sir, I realize you’ve a fondness for your position at Gibraltar. Yes, I heard your speech after it was surrendered—we are the Rock. But give Marshall a little credit. If we hit them hard enough, we would be cutting all German positions to the south off at the trunk.”

“But we won’t be hitting them hard enough,” said Churchill. “Five Brigades? That might make a nice raid, but it will not establish a secure lodgment on the continent.”

“Well Our General Marshall would beg to differ sir, with all due respect.”

“Marshall? He has no grasp of the real realities of war. The man has never had command of troops on the ground—not so much as a single platoon! He’s an administrator, not a strategist.”

“He making this same argument to your General Brooke even as we

speak,” said Hopkins.

“Is he?” Churchill shook his head. “Then Brooke will report that to me, whereupon I will reject it outright, and with extreme prejudice. You see? Your General should be here, with me, not speaking to Brooke in London.”

* * *

Hopkins was entirely correct in what he said, for miles away, Marshall was indeed meeting with Brooke, and when he got immediate resistance to the Sledgehammer plan again, he shifted the ball, leaned to one side and made his dodge.

“Why not make it a raid?” he suggested.

“What good would that do us?” said Brooke. “Yes, it might deny the Germans the use of a port for some time, but it would be of little strategic value. All it would do is prompt the Germans to improve their defenses, and eliminate the value of surprise for future operations aimed at establishing a real lodgment on the continent.”

“Well isn’t that the general idea, to get the Germans to send troops from Russia to the West? Things are very uncertain in Russia. Consider what would happen if we lost the Soviets.”

“Believe me, we’ve taken a full appreciation of that, yet it cannot result in our putting forward operations that are doomed to fail. No. If we do land, then we must do so with the intention of staying, and carrying the fight deeper into Europe. The Prime Minister is in full agreement with that.”

That was the real British deal killer. They would insist the landings be permanent, and then argue that the existing American plans were inadequate, premature, and doomed to fail. The Second plan, code named ROUNDUP, was to delay the attack until the spring or summer of 1943. To this Brooke conceded that they would take a harder look if that were to be the case, but SLEDGEHAMMER in 1942 could not be supported.

“The Germans will have the advantage,” he said. “They could reinforce against such a landing three times faster than we could get troops ashore, and bottle us up without transferring a single division from the East Front. This plan isn’t a sledgehammer, General Marshall, it’s barely a tack hammer.”

Frustrated with all of this, Marshall tried to then advocate a Japan First strategy. If the British would not cooperate, he’d take his football and go

elsewhere. He boldly proposed that the BOLERO troop buildup be diverted to the Pacific, all but two divisions, and of 53 air squadrons of various stripes, he would allocate 40 against the Japanese as well. His foil there was not Brooke or the British, but President Roosevelt himself. The President flatly stated that he wanted a Germany First strategy, and that some accommodation had to be reached with the British to get US forces in action in 1942. Period.

Brooke was aware of all of this, and so when Marshall continued to argue, he hit him right on the chin with it. “My good General Marshall, are you taking upon yourself the mantle of command? It is our understanding that your President Roosevelt lays down strategy, and his Generals carry out his wishes. That is how things are here, and Our Prime Minister has a firm understanding with your Mister Roosevelt as to the necessity of Germany First strategy in this war—please don’t forget that.”

“Well hells bells, General. What are we going to do then? The Japanese hit us last December, and we wasted half the year with nothing to show for it. We’re fighting in the Pacific, that’s for sure, but over here all you’ve done is take back a few hundred kilometers of useless desert. We’ve got to do something this year. You can’t win this war on the defensive.”

“We agree entirely, and we have a plan—this year, and to do some very great things.”

Those great things would be dreamt up in an operation that frustrated planners turned to for lack of anything else to do—then called Operation GYMNAST. It would involve an American landing at Casablanca, with the intention of denying that port to the Franco-German navy and cutting off their forward support base for their operation in the Canaries. In Fedorov’s history, the British wanted to expand this with further landings at Oran and other Algerian ports, but that would be impossible now. That was “SUPER-GYMNAST” in the original history. This time it would take a new face, and get back an old name.

“We’ve got to get back Gibraltar,” said Brooke. “The Germans are sitting there with warships, *Stukas* and fighters on the airfield, shore batteries, minefields, and a warren of U-boats. They’ve completely sealed off the straits, and closed all access to the Mediterranean from the Atlantic. The problem is that Gibraltar is simply not assailable from the sea, at least not directly. It will have to be taken from the landward side, possibly with the

cooperation of airborne forces, just as the Germans did when they stole the place from us.”

“That means a landing on the Spanish coast,” said Marshall, “and that opens a very smelly can of political worms.”

“That it does, but considering that Franco has already given aid and comfort to the enemy, we mustn’t be squeamish. He’s already quite perturbed with our position in the Canary Islands. The Prime Minister has authorized us to look at the Spanish coast as a hostile shore, and treat it accordingly.”

“Then where would we land?”

“There are excellent beaches north and south of Cadiz, but they would be too close to German airfields at Gibraltar and Tangier. So we’re looking farther north.”

Marshall squinted at the map. “How far north? You can’t mean the northern coast of Spain.”

“No, that would be out of the question. But this area here seems promising.” He handed Marshall a map.

“What? Lisbon? Portugal is a neutral state.”

“At the moment....”

Marshall could easily read British intentions there. “You mean to say they might join us?”

“That, or be forced to fight alongside Spain and France, and pay the consequences. Now, we’ve looked at the matter over and over, and Lisbon is the only landing site suitable for our armor. So here’s the plan. There’s limited shipping, so we’ll go first and move into Portugal. The transports will race back to England, and then your boys mount an operation at Casablanca. We’ll land 6th Armored at Lisbon, hopefully unopposed. The infantry can come in there or at Lagos further south. We’ll rally the Portuguese to our banners as we swing down through Seville, Cadiz, and come at Gibraltar from the north. You storm ashore at Casablanca, cut off the German supply center at Marrakesh, swing up and take Fez, and then drive right up to take Tangier. This will clear both sides of the straits at the same time, and kick the door to the Med right open. Once that is accomplished, your boys will be in a very good position to drive east to Oran, and we can assist by mounting a seaborne assault on that place from Gibraltar—again, a two pronged attack.”

“East to Oran? General, look at your map! Those are the Atlas Mountains. The terrain in northern Morocco is some of the worst ground in North Africa.

There's one road on the coast and the rest is probably all goat trails in that highland."

"You can go right around those mountains, right through Fez, up to Taza, and then the ground opens up considerably?"

"But it looks to be nearly 500 miles from Fez to Oran by that route."

"More like 450."

"That's a hell of a long supply line for our troops. It could take months for us to get to Oran if we meet stiff opposition."

"We believe the French will fold very quickly, and don't forget, we'll be in the game up north."

"What about Franco?" Marshall objected. "What about the Spanish Army? What about the Germans?"

"They've only a few divisions in Spain at the moment, far fewer than we would have to face in France."

"But they can reinforce from Southern France."

Brooke smiled, repeating what Marshall said earlier. "Well, isn't that the general idea? Let me put it to you this way. The Prime Minister is quite fixated on Gibraltar. We simply must take it back as a prelude to any further operations in the Med."

"Why operate there at all?" Marshall protested. "Land in France and the whole affair is completely cut off."

"True, but that simply doesn't seem possible this year, and SUPER-GYMNAST is possible—quite possible if we take it in stages as I've outlined."

"General, you've certainly hoodwinked us on that one. As an alternative, we could simply send several divisions to the Middle East through the Suez. That would satisfy Roosevelt's desire to get at Hitler this year, if not mine."

"But to what end? It's a long slog from Libya to Tangier. Rommel has all that friendly territory to fall back on—unless we take it from him with an operation like the one I've just outlined."

"Yet it's all a secondary theater. You want to fight Germany, then go for the jugular, right through northern France."

"Not in our view. This operation gives us a great deal. Taking Casablanca dooms the German position on the Canary Islands, eliminates those enemy airfields and U-boat bases, relieves pressure on the convoy route to Freetown and the Cape, and gives us those bases to further interdict U-boat operations

in the Atlantic. That alone is a bucket full. Add to that the return of Gibraltar, elimination of Spain as a hostile adversary, the possibility of knocking the Vichy French right out of the war, along with their formidable navy. We also gain access to the Eastern Med, and that puts us at Rommel's backside when all is said and done. We can roll on, take French Algeria, and go for Tunis. From there, we're looking right at Mussolini, and the possibility of mounting operations to knock him out of the war as well."

"All well and good," said Marshall, "but it's the Germans we have to get at in this fight. They're the ones we have to beat. While we busy ourselves with these operations, what if the Soviets fall?"

"I fully understand, but this year, we've only two real alternatives worth mentioning. One is the plan I've just outlined, the other is JUPITER, the invasion of Norway. While that would eliminate German bases there and secure the Murmansk convoy route, it's a very limited operation. We think the southern option holds more promise. If we can knock Spain, France, and Italy out of the war, that would isolate Germans in the West, and while we're doing that, BOLERO proceeds with the buildup for the main effort against the continent—perhaps next year as you have it in the ROUNDUP plan."

"A nice bone you're throwing me," said Marshall. "But I'm old enough to know there won't be much meat on it. These operations have a way of pulling in supplies, troops, and shipping. Once we get started down there, we could find it impossible to get to ROUNDUP next year."

"Well general, not to mix metaphors, but why not play out the first hand before we look at our cards in the second? It comes down to this: you can tell Mister Roosevelt that this is what we want—what we'll agree to and wholeheartedly support for 1942. At the very least, we must take the Rock, and to do so we will need to control both sides of the Gibraltar Strait. That means we'll need to also take Casablanca, and make the landings as I described. After that we can revisit this discussion in light of planning for ROUNDUP."

Chapter 17

“Alright,” said Marshall, “suppose I do tell the President all this. The first question that comes to mind is whether or not the French will fight when we hit the beaches. What is your opinion?”

“Oh, they’ll fight. After Mers el Kebir, Dakar, the big action off Fuerteventura, and that nasty business in Syria and Lebanon, they’ve taken a very hard line against us.”

“Then our landing at Casablanca will be opposed.” Marshall wasn’t happy about that.

“I’m afraid so, and the worst of it will be the French Navy. The Germans have made Casablanca their forward supply base for the Canary Islands. They’re shuttling convoys back and forth, largely protected by the French Navy, and that new German aircraft carrier. So if you do come, your navy will have to command the seas off Casablanca to even contemplate a landing there. In that, our own Royal Navy will be fully committed to support your operation. We hope our own landing at Lisbon will be unopposed, and therefore require a much smaller naval escort.”

“Well I’m an Army man, but it seems to me that we should win the battle at sea before the troops take to their transports. Those ships make good targets, and we can’t afford to lose any of the shipping and landing craft we commit to this operation.”

“We certainly agree with that.”

“Is there any way we can get to someone influential over there and see if we can persuade them to a more enlightened course? What about Darlan?”

“He’s firmly in the enemy camp by now.”

“How can you be so sure? If we could convince him to stand down, it would make those landings at Casablanca a little more palatable.”

“General, you are certainly welcome to try, but I very much doubt that Darlan will change his spots this deep into the game.”

“Well who’s next in line over there?”

“Next in line? You mean in the Navy? I suppose Admiral Laborde, or perhaps Admiral Estéva, or even Admiral Gensoul. You’d have better luck with Darlan than Laborde. He has no love for the British, and despises De

Gaulle. As for Gensoul, well, he was the French commander at Mers el Kebir, and wouldn't think to highly of us after that. "

"Doesn't sound very hopeful," said Marshall. "Well then, *can* we command the seas off Casablanca, and if so, how soon?"

"That is a question I should best put to our Admiral Tovey. I would expect him to meet with your Admiral King to iron the matter out. We've achieved a kind of stalemate in the Canaries, so our good Admiral went north to plan the defense of a big convoy to Murmansk. It's been tooth and nail up there, particularly because the Germans have establish a big new base near Trondheim—Nordstern."

"Wouldn't that be within range of your bombers?"

"Quite so, but it's the German fighters we need to worry about. It's 750 air miles from Scotland to Trondheim, and we haven't a fighter that can make that range. So any support for Bomber Command has to come off the few carriers we have. Your Wildcats have helped out a great deal—we call them Martlets now, but at least they can give us a chance against those Bf-109s. A pity we can't get our Spitfires up there, but we're working on better sea based fighters, and should have more soon enough."

"I'm afraid we'll have a similar problem if we go for Casablanca," said Marshall. "You may have heard we lost two of our fleet carriers in the Coral Sea."

"Nasty business there," said Brooke.

"Yes, well that means we're down to just three fleet class carriers in the Pacific, and already tangling with the Japanese in the Fiji Island group. General, we have nothing beyond our old carrier *Ranger* to send for this Casablanca operation, and even keeping that in the Atlantic might be difficult."

"We'll do our best to help out, and I believe we can establish air superiority over the landing sites."

"General," said Marshall, "I must tell you that we've looked this over, as your own people have as well, and many of our analysts give these landings a 40% chance of succeeding—at best."

"Yes, between the French Navy, the German army, and the high surf conditions, our own people agree. But where else can we go, general Marshall?"

"How about the Pas de Calais." Marshall tried one more time, but he

ended with a wry grin. “Very well, I’ll discuss this with President Roosevelt, and I expect he’ll make the final decision. But I must tell you, I can’t give it much of an endorsement. That said, I’ll support the plan if the President directs me to do so, and in that you can count on us doing anything possible to make it work.”

“General, that is all we could possibly hope for. It’s all risky business. That’s the nature of war, but we have to start the road back somewhere, and these are objectives worth fighting for. We simply can’t sit idle throughout the remainder of this year. We’ve promised Sergei Kirov we would do everything possible to open a Second Front, and so we need to look at this whole affair with that in mind.”

“Very well,” Marshall conceded, but he did have one further bone to chew. “The president is concerned about command control in a joint operation like this. Even though our forces will be widely separated at the outset, eventually they’ll need to be well coordinated. Now I know you people have carried the ball for three years while we sat on the sidelines, but he’s asking for an American General in overall command.”

“Will that be a sticking point?”

“Very likely.”

“Alright then. This issue has been under consideration for some time, and we’ve agreed to that—even suggested it. I’ve heard several names bandied about. Perhaps you ought to take charge.”

Marshall smiled. “Another bone, General Brooke? No thank you. I’m well aware of what the Prime thinks of me, and what you may think of me as well. I’ve been told you suggested General MacArthur should be in command of our Joint Chiefs, so spare me the flattery. We have another man in mind, General Eisenhower.”

* * *

Whether Marshall could see it or not, the Americans were going to land somewhere in 1942, and it would not be France. The man charged with deciding the how and when of it all was one Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the cadre of officers that he would soon command would all cut their teeth in the campaign that would follow, rising to become the captains of battle whose names would ring through the history from that day forward, Eisenhower,

George Patton, Omar Bradley, Mark Clark. They would rise, like cream, to the top of the churning vat that America's war effort would soon become, and on their shoulders would fall the weight of a war that would grow heavier and heavier the longer they carried it.

In spite of all optimism at the outset, the future they could see ahead of them was but dimly perceived now. Anton Fedorov might have laid out the broad strokes, the slow probing engagements that lay ahead in North Africa as the American Army sputtered and learned and improvised its way into a force worthy of battle. Ahead lay Casablanca, and the drive north to Tangier, only the first in a long series of battles that might eventually lead them to Tunisia. Where Kasserene Pass had become a proving ground for American will and fighting skill, and a test of morale, those tests would likely be given at some other place now.

That was the consequence of Fedorov's own intervention. The history was now so twisted that it was beginning to take on a new life of its own, and to write into the record of war a whole new series of battles and engagements where there was no longer any clear connection of reference point to the old events he once knew. In North Africa, instead of chasing the British 8th Army all the way to its stubborn last stand at el Alamein, Rommel was the one to retreat from Gazala, and it was he who would settle into a deeply entrenched defensive position at Mersa Brega. Whether he could ever do what Montgomery did, build up and then launch yet another bold offensive into Cyrenaica, remained to be seen.

The truth of the matter was that Rommel's chances for any such renewed offensive were now a quickly diminishing prospect. The Americans were coming, a breed of ordinary citizen soldiers, green as they came stumbling off the transports for the most part, glassy eyed with sleep, missing sweethearts back home, looking like disheveled tourists in uniform, always eager to trade a candy bar or cigarette for something they had taken a fancy too in the local settings where they would soon find themselves. They would appear as a motley, unshaven, naive band of marauders to some, a legion of saviors to others. Yet soon, in the harsh dry and deeply weathered land of North Africa, they would begin to learn the craft of killing, the art of war, the heartless cold soul of it all that was nowhere apparent as they first boarded the transports in New York and other Atlantic ports.

Their worries then were whether they had enough socks and underwear in

their swollen duffel bags. Memories of the waving crowds seeing them off at the wharves and quays were still dancing in their minds as they slept those first nights at sea, along with the faces and limbs of their sweethearts back home. Soon they would stand on decks of their ships, looking for sun in the sallow grey sky, and their thoughts would turn to darker things as they stared out as the slow procession of the convoys. Were there German U-boats waiting for them out there? The news of what had happened to that convoy to Murmansk cast a dark shadow.

Yes, the Americans were finally coming, going “over there” again, just as the Doughboys had in the first war. But this fight would be different. It had already burned through Europe once like a fast moving fire, and now the flames of that war would be rekindled and driven on by a heartless wind to Germany. This was all that lay ahead, city after city sleeping quietly, for the bombers had not yet come. Their buildings and streets still stood in a reasonable semblance of order. The tanks had not ground up the cobblestone byways. The artillery had not shattered the classic old storefronts and dormered hotels. The fire had not yet rained down from the sky, consuming, consuming, and extinguishing ten thousand human souls in a hour’s time. And it would get worse than that—far worse.

As Fedorov flipped through the pages of his old history books, he could glimpse an outline of what was to come. Casablanca, Oran, Algiers, Tunis, Bizerte, all cities that would eventually have to be taken by the Allies in time. Where the fires of war would go next remained uncertain. Would the Allies then leap to Sicily and into Italy to dethrone Mussolini, or might they aim their swords at the proverbial “soft underbelly of Europe?”

If they ever did muster the force and will to return to France, would it be from the south, or follow George Marshall’s hope for a hard landing on the coasts of Brittany, Normandy, or the Pas de Calais. And if they did come, would they prevail as they once did with a massive operation like Overlord, a grinding breakout like Cobra, a daring leap towards the Rhine like Market-Garden? Would the Germans mount again that last desperate counteroffensive that was once to be called the Battle of the Bulge? All that remained to be seen, battles waiting like sheathed swords in fate’s armory.

Now, in July of 1942, the man who might lead this new Allied effort forward was only just beginning to take on that mantle of command. Dwight D. Eisenhower took up residence in Norfolk House in London at the outset to

continue on with what he called the ‘thrashing about in the dark’ where all these war plans were concerned. The Operation that had once been called “Super-Gymnast” was now getting a new code name. It would simply be called TORCH.

Eisenhower’s high forehead, soft blue eyes, thinning hair, and amenable disposition did not at first seem to project the presence that could unite the Allies and forge an alloy strong enough to shatter the steel of the mighty Wehrmacht. He was not the surly, growling and aggressive soul that a man like George Patton was, nor again the starched, proper, but methodically implacable soul that was Montgomery. A big man, with a strong, athletic build, Eisenhower wore the uniform well, every inch a soldier, and his signature grin would vie with a notoriously quick temper as his moods shifted with circumstances.

Yet behind the ticking of that pendulum, behind that high forehead, Eisenhower possessed a sharp cool intelligence, a talent for planning and organization, and one other attribute that he was to need in abundance in the days ahead—patience. That and a penchant for giving fair treatment and hearing to every side of an argument, led all those associated with him to believe he was worthy of their trust, a most valuable commodity. His easy smile could be disarming, and others warmed to him quickly, conceding him their good regard in a way that was almost effortless.

He was a modest man, generous with subordinates, dedicated to his duty, and honest and fair in all his dealings with others. Then again he was a driven man as well, bent on success, and willing to pit himself against heavy odds to prevail. His affable and gregarious nature won him friends easily, and people saw in him a quiet sense of dignity and honor that inspired confidence. His ability to hide his rough edges and self-doubts was a part of all that. He bore no grudges, had no thirst for revenge, hated no other man, but would stand up to anyone who he thought was on the wrong side of an argument.

These were just a few of the qualities that would make him the leader he was to become, very far from the haughty and almost imperial personage of a Douglas MacArthur, a man Eisenhower once served as a clerk. He was farther yet from a man like Vladimir Karpov, with none of the darkness that undermined the latter’s soul, and no real animosity for anyone in his heart.

In spite of these qualities, Eisenhower would face many hardships along the way. No man is ever immune to doubt, or even despair. Eisenhower

would face many doubts in the months and years ahead and also face down both depression and despair, which he cleverly hid behind that easy smile. Any man of Eisenhower's age and maturity who still carried what he thought to be a lucky token in his pocket, was one who still faced doubt and uncertainty, in spite of the experience delivered with age. Eisenhower had not one, but three lucky coins in his pocket, a favorite silver dollar that he always carried but never spent, a five guinea gold piece, and a single French Franc.

That last coin was much on his mind, shifting between his long fingers as he considered what would come of this first confrontation with French forces in North Africa. He would hash out the possibilities ahead with his opposite number, one Walter Bedell Smith, a man Eisenhower personally requested as his Chief of Staff. While often called Ike's "Hatchet Man" for the toughness he could display in dealings with others, Smith also had a knack for handling the British. He wasn't Eisenhower's friend, and the two men seldom spent social time together, but they cooperated well as planners and organizers, which was what was needed now.

The time had come to put the divisive argument aside and start planning that war, and Eisenhower had Smith in hand to think it through, along with General Mark Clark. They were about to put the finishing touches on the plan for the first great Allied offensive of the war, but the situation facing the Allies was considerably different in this telling of events.

The Med was closed. There could be no landing in Algiers or Oran, and no rapid movement into Tunisia. The United States had also declared war on Vichy France, so all embassies were shut down and Wild Bill Donovan's OSS would never use them to flood French North Africa with agents and saboteurs. With Gibraltar in German hands, the closest allied airfield would be at Madeira in the Atlantic. They would have to bring everything else with them on carriers until new airfields were seized. Portugal was a reluctant co-conspirator, wary of exposing itself to the ravages of war. All of Franco's Spain stood between the planned British landing at Lisbon and their objective at Gibraltar.

These were only some of the difficulties they would face, and then there was the fact that France would be unquestioningly hostile, on land and at sea, and backed by German troops from the very beginning of the operation.

Eisenhower was very much against the plan at the outset. "This is a black day," he said. "The Limeys have had their way with this whole thing, and

now our only chance is for Roosevelt to veto this TORCH plan.”

“He won’t,” said Clark. “He’s thick as thieves with the Prime, and this is what Churchill wants.” The Americans had taken to calling Churchill that, ‘The Prime,’ as if he was a cut of some particularly good steak or rib roast. Clark was correct, for in spite of renewed attempts by Marshall to get the operation cancelled, Roosevelt insisted that TORCH should go forward.

And that was that.

Chapter 18

A month later, after a lot of haggling and planning, Eisenhower still had grave doubts. “We ought to invade Spain and French North Africa at the same time,” he said, “but we just don’t have the shipping. By God, we’ll have to divide our forces in this thing, transports, troops, naval air support allocations. The British were whining we weren’t hitting the French coast hard enough in SLEDGEHAMMER, now look at this mess.”

“They want Gibraltar back,” said Clark. “They seem obsessed with it. I suppose I can understand that in one sense. It’s was the first real British outpost the Germans took from them. If they landed on Cuba and took Guantanamo Bay, we’d sure as hell be dead set on kicking them out. But there’s something more to it than that. I’ve heard things.”

“What is that suppose to mean?” said Eisenhower.

“I’m not really sure, but there have been some odd whispers about Gibraltar. I’m told their Navy insists it be taken as soon as possible.”

“Understandable,” said Smith. “As it sits now, they’ve a very long sea route around the Cape to supply Egypt.”

“That’s another thing,” said Clark. “Egypt. Now they’ve done quite well there, wouldn’t you say? It looked like Rommel was going to run them into the Suez Canal a while back, and then he got stopped cold. Well, there’s something going on over there, something fishy, and we’ve been left out of the loop.”

“What have you heard?” said Ike.

“First off, what’s all this about a Russian ship popping off with advanced rocketry?”

“Yes, I did read that when it circulated,” said Eisenhower.

“Then there was that odd meeting in Siwa with Churchill after they first stopped Rommel. Now they’ve kept their cards fairly close to their chests over there. I was in Alexandria to see about a possible mission to slip into French North Africa and see if we could talk some sense into Darlan, and believe me, the British treated me like a pariah. I had the distinct feeling that they were hiding something. I was all set to tour the front, and lord knows they found fifteen reasons to kill that idea. They had a staffer with me every

goddamned day, and at time they would drive me about in a limousine with curtains on the windows—for my security, or so they said. Then, when I asked about the scuttlebutt concerning some new tanks they might have, they looked at me like I was asking them for their daughter's virginity!"

"We got the same runaround," said Eisenhower, "and I've heard that same thing—some new British tank over there kicking the hell out of Rommel's Panzers—probably their new infantry tank to replace the Matilda. Well, if it's true, why are they still pan handling for more of our Grants?"

"Good point," said Smith. "And they also want to restrict our air operations in this new TORCH plan. They'll accept planes, mind you, but in the 8th Army Theater, they want total control of all air operations, and they want to use all British pilots."

"Well correct me if I'm wrong," said Eisenhower, "but I thought beggars shouldn't be choosers. It's almost as if they had something over there that they flat out don't want us to see. Who knows, maybe it's this tank that been in the rumor mill. Frankly, all this is for Marshall to worry about. What I've got to worry about is this goddamned plan. Beetle, what are we really going to be looking at when we do land at Casablanca? What have the French got there in the way of an active garrison?" Those that knew Smith had taken to using, and spelling, his middle name that way—Beetle instead of Bedell.

Smith leaned back, looking over the latest intelligence report. "Casablanca Division—three regiments of infantry there, two others in the general vicinity, but with little in the way of any armor, and poor artillery. But there's three other divisions in Morocco, one at Fez, another at Marrakech, and a third at Meknes just west of Fez. That last unit does duty on the coast from time to time, at Rabat north of Casablanca."

"Four divisions... And the Germans?"

"Most of the troops around Casablanca are Luftwaffe, but they just moved the 327th Infantry Division into Marrakesh."

"No Panzer Divisions?"

"Not in Morocco. The 16th is in Southern France, and intel picked up what looks like advanced units of that division in Barcelona. They could be getting ready to move the whole lot into Spain. Other than that, they'll have a good veteran infantry division handy, the 15th Infantry, but it's also in southern France."

"Nothing in Spain?"

“The 337th at Madrid, garrison troops at Gibraltar and Tangier, shore batteries, Ack Ack units, service troops and some naval personnel.”

“Well hell, Beetle, it doesn’t seem like they’re on to us with this operation. We just might catch them with their pants down.”

“Except for the 16th Panzer Division,” said Smith. “It they move that into Spain, it will be a problem for the British. But we must also consider what they do with the troops they have in the Canary Islands. They’ve got two air mobile divisions there, the 7th Flieger and 22nd Air landing—both tough outfits. There’s a mountain regiment there that they took from Rommel last spring, and General Kubler is the nominal commander of that entire force.”

“Once we hit the beaches at Casablanca, all those troops are out on a limb,” said Eisenhower.

“Which is why we’ve still got to worry about them. They can move by air, perhaps only one regiment at a time, but that means we could eventually face a buildup to the south.”

“We’ve accounted for that possibility in the plan,” said Ike. “The German division at Marrakesh could move to Safi and raise hell with our optional landing there. But otherwise, it will certainly come north to Casablanca. Those airborne troops will be used to reinforce their lines after we’ve landed and they see what cards we have in our hand. What I can’t figure is why they don’t have anything north of Rabat.”

“They probably think we can’t hit them there under their land based air power.”

“True, but that means no German troops of note between Casablanca and Tangier. So far I like that, because I don’t think they’ll be able to reinforce Morocco once this thing starts. Patton will like it too.”

“You sure about Patton?”

“He’s the best man for the job. He’ll have all of 2nd Armored Division, and the 3rd and 9th Infantry Divisions—eventually. 3rd Division is scheduled for D+3, the 9th Division for D+5—assuming the U-boats don’t get them first.”

The British asked for our 1st Armored at their end of things—in Spain.”

“If they do have a new tank, it sure doesn’t sound like they have much confidence. Why do they want our armor in Spain?”

“You said it yourself,” said Eisenhower. “Given the fact that 16th Panzer may be moving as you suggest, I think we’d better agree to that—in part. We

were going to lead with the 9th Infantry, but I've asked for the Big Red One instead on D-Day.

"That rips up Fredendall's Corps," said Smith. "The British get his armor and Patton takes the rest."

"I'll let him down easy," said Eisenhower. "He still has the Corps, only he'll be standing in Patton's shadow, that's all. And the Brits just get one combat command in floating reserve. I'm going to use Hatch and CCB in the first wave south of Casablanca"

"What about Harmon's Division?"

"2nd Armored? Hell, it will sit in the UK waiting for those transports to get back there after they deliver the Brits to Lisbon. That means we can't expect that division to arrive until D+5."

"What does Patton think of all this?"

"He wasn't happy the first go round," said Eisenhower. "Said he thought the troops were too green. Then again, after I handed him the 1st Infantry Division, he changed his tune."

"What's in reserve?"

"Only one regiment from 34th Infantry. The 168th RCT will be held in the Azores, a good position from which we could reinforce either landing in a pinch."

"So what do our Limey friends throw into this?" Smith set down his clipboard.

"They'll send the 6th Armored Division, 3rd and 43rd Infantry Divisions, and the 78th Infantry Division in reserve."

"Is that going to be enough armor?"

"I suppose that's why they asked for our 1st Armored Division, but my inclination is to be stingy there. I allocated CCA as a reserve for Portugal, but it won't go ashore unless absolutely needed. We need a hammer in the tool box just in case one end of this offensive has difficulties—and it could be our end. I've communicated this to our friends, and so they've decided to make both their infantry divisions mixed, adding the 33rd Armored Brigade to one, and 34th Armored Brigade to the other."

"They have those new tanks?"

Eisenhower was fishing about in a brief case. "Ah, here it is—the specs on that new heavy infantry tank. Maybe this is the mystery they were hiding over in Egypt and Libya. They're calling it the Churchill."

“Buttering the old man’s bread, are they?”

Eisenhower smiled. “Let’s see how flattering the Germans find it. It’s nearly 40 tons, and they’ve finally ditched that lousy 2 pounder gun for something better. This one has a 75mm quick firing main gun, and a pair of Besa 7.92mm machine guns. It was meant to replace their old Matildas and Valentines. It says here that they’ve sent some to Alexandria, and the brigades assigned for TORCH will fight right alongside their infantry.”

“Forty tons... Now I see why they wanted Lisbon. They need a good port to get those things ashore. Maybe you’re correct and these are the tanks they field tested over in Libya.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” said Eisenhower. “Let’s just hope the Portuguese welcome them with open arms.” Ike walked to the window, looking out on the city, seeing the grey overcast sky, and equally grey men and women going about whatever business the war had put before them. London was still a dreary place, even in the summer this year, with the weather more austere than many could remember. Some said it all had to do with that big volcano that blew its top in the Pacific, but it would be the least of his worries.

“Tomorrow we move to the Azores and get the forward HQ up and running. My God, Beetle, the thought that we’re going to try to move six divisions by sea still gives me the willies. There’s a thousand things that could go wrong. Hell, it’s taken us months just to modify the transports so they could be combat loaded. Then there’s the U-boat threat, the German Navy, the French Navy, the Luftwaffe.”

“You’re an Army man,” said Smith, “But don’t forget there’s a US Navy out there too, and the Royal Navy right at our shoulder. That’s the opening round of this whole thing. We win that, and our boys will get to Casablanca alright.”

“Burrough is leading the naval contingent,” said Clark, his mood darkening somewhat. “You know what he told me? He said he’d feel lucky if we got half the transports safely to their landing zones. And I’ve heard the same from a number of good men—they say we have a 50/50 chance in this.”

What do they know?” said Eisenhower dismissively. “Gentlemen, let me tell you what our ground commander has been up to lately. He’s gotten religion. Patton is selling this operation like he was going to make a personal profit from the affair. In fact, the other day he came in and wanted to show

me his first draft of a demand he's planning to read the French commander—a demand for his immediate surrender! I like that man's style. So God help the French when we do get there, because with Georgie out in front leading our boys in, the Frogs won't have a chance.”

He fished about in his pocket, producing a pair of cigars. “Gentlemen—to our last night in London!”

* * *

Americans had staked out a little patch of London since the time when John Adams had visited England in 1785. Grosvenor Square had been developed in 1721 by Sir Richard Grosvenor, 4th Baronet, a member of Parliament at the time and the ancestor of the Dukes of Westminster. There were elegant mansions, and a palatial estate that was later rebuilt with swank hotels. Eisenhower had followed in the footsteps of Adams when he set up his headquarters at Number 20 Grosvenor Square, to coordinate the planning for Torch. There, his meticulous aide, Lieutenant Commander Harry Butcher, USN, had been keeping a diary of these events, noting all important discussions and decisions, but that morning, as they prepared to get down to the long line of cars waiting to take them to the airport, something was troubling Butcher.

A former news man and broadcaster for CBS, Butcher was the perfect man to take on the role of journalist, documenting the doings of Eisenhower and his staff as they worked up to the brink of this momentous opening campaign. But something was wrong.

“Harry?” said Ike, giving him a look. “You get a bad egg for breakfast?”

“No sir... It's very odd.”

“What's wrong?”

“The War Diary. You know I've been keeping minutes of all the meetings, notating everything in a daily diary for the historical record. But this is strange. I went to make an entry this morning, and a page is missing—page 117.”

“A page missing...” Eisenhower didn't like the sound of that. “What was on that page?”

Butcher swallowed. “Well sir... That was the day we finalized the objectives for TORCH. I had all those pages on my desk just last night before

I bound them so I could pack them. I'm sorry sir, but I've looked everywhere."

"Good Lord. Missing? It's got to be somewhere close by. Look for it again, and by God, be careful. I had a loose lipped naval officer in here yesterday and I read him the riot act and sent the son-of-a-bitch home. This thing is about to get traction, and security is paramount."

They looked everywhere, high and low. Eisenhower went through his desk and personal office from top to bottom. They opened every attaché, every brief, any file box that might harbor the missing page. Then orders went out that a search was to be made of all baggage stored for shipment to the Azores. Nobody was going anywhere that morning, and a phone call was made to the airport to stand Eisenhower's plane down. The page was never found.

A hundred miles southeast of London, the B-Dienst station at Calais was very busy that morning. Unbeknownst to the Allies, the Abwehr had a witless collaborator inside the headquarters facility, just a cleaning woman, and with no real position in the echelon of agents and provocateurs Canaris employed. She had passed through Butcher's office while carrying out a basket of trash the previous night, saw the page on the floor, and thinking it had been meant for a waste basket, she simply added it to the one she was carrying.

That night a truck came by the dump bin for the facility, and two men got out, about to make off with an unscheduled rubbish haul. These men were not unwitting collaborators, but willful agents in the web Canaris had spun, and by 04:00 they had discovered the unshredded paper and could not believe their eyes. They immediately drove to a quiet hotel on the edge of the city, handing the find off to yet another man, who sent a coded message to B-Dienst.

At dawn, the message was on the desk of Canaris, and he looked at it with a mixture of anticipation and fear in his eyes. There it was, chapter and verse, the landing sites, the units assigned, the list of objectives and expected times when they might be secured. He shook his head, realizing that something had slipped on the other side, a look approaching shock on his face. Only two other men could have seen the document, the signalmen who first received it.

Canaris leaned back, thinking. Then he reached for a secure telephone and rang up Calais. He wanted those men in a car heading for Brussels immediately, and he made arrangements to go there himself. Then he took

the message, folded it quietly, and lit a match beneath it over his waste basket. Later that day, the two signalmen would meet a most unexpected fate in Brussels. Canaris was a very careful man, for one had to be very clever to lead the life he was living out at that moment.

He was head of the Abwehr, all German intelligence gathering, and he had just told Keitel that, as far as he was concerned, the Allies still remained incapable of mounting any real offensive threat for 1942. There had not been a whisper or shred of evidence indicating otherwise, and all of his most reliable sources of information had dried up. That was the way he intended to keep things, nice and quiet, for Canaris was secretly in league with British MI-6, even while he also quietly organized a select group of men that would come to be known as the Schwartz Kapelle—the “Black Orchestra.” Together they had been working on a dark fugue in the chorus of the Nazi regime, intending to plot the eventual assassination of Hitler.

Yet no matter how careful Canaris was, other men had looked on him with suspicion for some time. Goring and Raeder had hidden reservations about the man, but it was the sinister head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, that would soon be on his trail. That signal had also been received by the special SS listening post on the coast, and it had been routed to Himmler as well. The pallid faced bespeckled man pressed his lips together as he read it. Then he simply opened a briefcase and slipped it into a special folder, the one that held the transcripts of trans-Atlantic cable intercepts that not even Canaris had been privy to. Himmler had been quietly reading the transcripts of conversation between Eisenhower, Roosevelt, Churchill and others. He knew everything that was about to happen on the coasts of Spain and Morocco now, and he also knew that Canaris had received that same message, even while he had been insisting that no threat was imminent.

He smiled, a dark cold smile that would have frozen the blood of a detention camp prisoner. It was going to be a very busy morning.

Part VII

Charlemagne's Ghost

“Take action! An inch of movement will bring you closer to your goals than a mile of intention.”

— Steve Maraboli

Chapter 19

Himmler had been very concerned with the German position in the West, and he had done several things to correct that perceived weakness. While all of his best divisions were with General Steiner in Russia, he had been feverishly working on establishing more forces that could be used in emergency situations which he clearly perceived on the near horizon. One of his pet projects in France was a unit he had formed that would later come to be called the 33rd Waffen SS Grenadier Division. Manpower was always an issue, for Halder was sweeping off all the best German troops to build more infantry divisions. But Himmler thought he could find a ready source of fighting men in France, and he knew exactly where he could start.

When the Vichy Regime had taken nominal control after the armistice, and formally signed an accord with Germany, the nation had been torn by conflicting alliances for some time. De Gaulle had fled to claim he represented the real French government in exile, denouncing Vichy rule as traitorous. An underground resistance movement had cropped up in France, but the Vichy regime had created small paramilitary units to counter it called the Milice. In Fedorov's history, these units had not really been formed until 1942, but the close cooperation of French and Germany had seen them come into being much earlier now.

As his own SS had arisen from such units, Himmler was very interested in this development. He soon had the idea that he might recruit Frenchmen loyal to the Vichy regime, and to Germany, and use them as the building blocks for a stronger military formation. This was what he did, in the early spring of 1942 instead of doing it two years later in 1944, and the result was a mobile unit that he quietly called his "Charlemagne Brigade." It was manned by 7,000 Frenchmen, with another 5000 good SS men leavening the dough.

Himmler had formed the unit in mid March, and it had been involved with extensive training on battlefield deployment, tactics and also counterinsurgency operations. He had also commandeered transport, and even armored fighting vehicles and armored cars siphoned from the production lines in Germany. His personal authority went very far in that regard, and he could get most everything he wanted without anyone daring to

make an objection, at least outside the shadowed halls of OKW itself. Six months later, the Charlemagne Brigade was very well equipped, and it would become feared by friend and foe alike.

For the local Free French underground, it was feared even more than the Gestapo, for the men in the unit had knowledge of the language and culture that made them particularly effective in a counterinsurgency role. In many ways, they were harder on their own citizens than the Germans were, and this unit would remain fanatically loyal to Himmler's SS, and by extension to Germany, throughout the war.

Their emblem was a divided shield, with a *fleurs-de-lys* on the left side (dexter) representing France, and an Imperial Eagle on the right side (sinister) representing Germany. The actual unit emblem had the two symbols in reversed positions, until someone pointed out that France was in the west, and its symbol should be on the dexter side of the shield. Together the dual symbolism represented the new combined Franco-German state that Himmler envisioned after the war was won, and he had just created its first official military unit.

Troops had been raised from French prisoners of war, the LVF, or *Legion Volontaires Francais*. Designated *Infanterieregiment 638* by the Germans, it had fought with the 7th Infantry Division near Moscow, and was later returned to France for rehabilitation. Himmler seized upon it as a ready source of loyal, well trained combat veterans to throw into his stew. Another French regiment, *La Légion Tricolore*, was also incorporated.

All these troops were soon formed into the *Waffen-Grenadier-Brigade der SS 'Charlemagne,'* with two regiments, the 57th and 58th, consisting of two battalions each, and a third two battalion regiment raised from Himmler's handpicked SS, known as the *Sturmregiment*, where most of the best equipment was concentrated. A full Assault Pioneer Battalion and a highly motorized Recon Battalion fleshed out the ground troops for the heavy brigade, and they were supported by a Panzerjager Battalion and an Artillery Battalion. The German born Gustav Krukenberg, fluent in French, was given overall command as *Brigadeführer*, also much earlier than in Fedorov's history. He coordinated with Colonels Lacroix and Demessine who commanded the two French Regiments.

The signal Himmler had received, and all he secretly had gleaned from those trans-Atlantic cable telephone conversations, led him to firmly believe

the information was not a ruse, but real and credible evidence of an imminent Allied invasion operation.

The Allies are finally kindling their torch, he thought. So we must have a ready bucket brigade waiting for them when they come to Spain. This is a perfect opportunity to utilize my new combined Franco-German unit—the ghosts of Charlemagne as they are sometimes called by the locals. I must get it moving at once, but in a way that may not cause undue alarm if the Allied reconnaissance sees the troops on the trains. So I will use my network to let it slip that a new Volunteer French unit is being sent to Tunisia. That would be on the back end of any Allied planning, and nothing they would concern themselves with for these initial landings.

Yes, I will cut orders to have the unit move to Toulon, but at the last minute I will re-route the trains through Montpellier and then along the coast to Barcelona. That is a good port where they could embark for French North Africa, or I could also just continue along the Spanish coast to Valencia, Cartagena, Malaga and then to Gibraltar. The final destination will depend on the outcome of these Allied landings.

So here was a unit raised like the ghosts they were named after, born of men from fallen France in league with their former enemies. It was not even on the radar screen as far as Allied intelligence went. The various battalions had been dispersed all over France, but now Himmler gave orders for them to concentrate in rail yards north of Paris, and begin their journey south. Then he also strongly suggested to Hube that he get his 16th Panzer Division across the border and on the trains to Madrid as soon as possible. When the chief of the SS gives you that kind of advice, you act on it, and even without knowing the real reason for this move, Hube pushed his units along.

Elsewhere in France, the Germans had Dollman's 7th Army in the south and along the Brittany and Normandy regions. 25th Korps had the 17th Infantry and 6th Panzer rebuilding with new equipment after the disastrous winter campaign in Russia. Three more static divisions fleshed out this Korps, the 333rd, 335th and 709th. The 84th Korps had another three static divisions, the 319th, 320th, and 716th. There were also five Fortress Regiments working on the Atlantic Wall fortifications, the 14th, 19th, 9th, 11th, and 17th.

Farther north, the 15th Army under General Haase had the 81st Korps with three static divisions, the 302nd, 332nd and 711th. The rest of his force

was coastal artillery and the 21st Fortress Regiment. 82nd Korps had one mobile infantry division, the 106th, and three more static divisions, the 304th, 306th, and 321st, along with 12th and 21st Fortress Regiments. This force was mainly along the shores closest to England, covering the region from the Siene River at La Havre through Calais, Dunkirk and Ostend. It was supposed to have 10th Panzer Division as a strong mobile reserve, but that unit had been sent to Rommel early, along with the Hermann Goering Brigade.

This meant that in addition to Hube's 16th Panzer Division now entering Spain, there were another 15 German divisions in France, though only three had the transport assets required to move anywhere efficiently, and all these troops were stretched out along the entire French coast, from Ostend to Bayonne. One other division, the 7th Panzer, was now being withdrawn from Russia for a planned movement to France. If the British had been more flexible, seeing the way TORCH had ballooned to a six division assault at two widely separated locations, they might have also seen that the concentration of all six of these divisions at one point on the coast of France, as Marshall proposed, might have had a very good chance of making a successful landing. But that was not to be—at least not yet.

Often thought of as a small preliminary operation, few realized the massive scale of TORCH. While not quite as big as OVERLORD, it was certainly in the same league. The question of whether or not it would be successful now was one part political, and three parts military. Neutral Portugal was none too happy to think that their nation would soon be a war zone, and Franco was none too happy to think his Army was now going to have to muster along the Portuguese frontier, and more German troops were already clogging his rail lines, bound for Madrid.

His regime might not survive a successful Allied invasion of Spain, and he knew that Don Carlos, the youngest child of the Duke of Tuscany, was waiting in the wings to re-establish the Monarchy. Even though he had three living older brothers who might also claim the throne, none expressed any interest in that adventure. As for the troops he might command, their loyalty was always questionable, and there was a strong Nationalist movement that was very much opposed to Franco's flirtations with Hitler. All told, Franco had about 24 divisions by 1940, but of these he probably could count on no more than 12, with each division having the combat potential of a brigade, if

even that. He clustered these into three Corps at Madrid, Seville and Valencia, and to these he added three armored regiments with old German hand me down Panzer IIs, a few Russian T-26s left over from the Civil War, and a few Pz IVDs, no more than ten per regiment. Franco had good reason to be nervous.

Nor were the French really happy now that the moment of promised retribution from their former Allies was at hand. Some had already begun to think over the consequences of their acquiescence in joining the Axis powers. The gallows cast a long cold shadow in their minds, and if Charlemagne's Ghost could arise that hour and see the men and machines now marching in his name, he might have wept.

Yet there was plenty of gloom and doom to go around on all sides. The Americans were still disgruntled about the operation, and harbored many inner doubts that were often expressed in their war dairies. The overall ground commander, the irascible George Patton,. Privately wrote that: "The job I am going on is about as desperate a venture as has ever been undertaken by any force in the world's history." Yet outwardly he put on his war face, telling Eisenhower that he would get to the beaches one way or another, and not leave until the enemy had been vanquished, or he himself was dead. He told the same thing to the President in a private meeting before the convoy departed.

Another gritty General, Ernest Harmon of the 2nd Armored Division, had been profoundly shocked to observe the results of a practice assault landing on the shores of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. His troops and equipment ended up scattered all over the coast, taking the better part of a day to reorganize. This was an early morning landing, with good light, on a calm friendly shore, with no enemy present, and a lighthouse beacon there as a guidepost to boot. The thought that he would soon be landing at night, on hostile shores, possibly under enemy fire, was suddenly most disconcerting. Eisenhower had been treated to the same shock when he witnessed the mock landing of the 1st Infantry in Scotland—another disaster with troops clumped in groups on the shore, aimless, unable to form up and get underway towards their objectives. Now the wisdom of the British end of the plan, landing in a friendly port at Lisbon, became apparent.

The only thing that would counterbalance this raw inexperience on the part of the Americans, was an enemy that had languished in Morocco for

years without so much as seeing a single enemy plane, the French. Their “divisions” were undermanned, ill equipped and led by officers with little wartime experience. Those that had seen combat had experienced the demoralization of defeat, seen their country occupied by the Germans, and then they had to wrestle with the fact that they were now “collaborators.” In 1940 and 1941, with Germany seeming invincible, they might have thought they had joined the winning side. Now, in the late summer of 1942, things were looking a little different. Rumors began to circulate that the entire American Army was coming, with thousands of ships, planes and tanks.

So no one was happy, on either side, and a most unusual battle was finally about to begin. The Second Front was opening in the West, not soon enough for the Soviets, not where the Americans had hoped to see it come, and not to anybody’s liking. It was an operation mounted because the Allies had decided that only one thing could be worse—idling through the last months of the year and failing to mount some challenge to the Axis powers that had ruled the day since the outbreak of the war.

Chapter 20

The battle for control of the Moroccan coast would first have to be fought on and over the seas that washed that forsaken shore. In this, the Allied navies would now show the tremendous naval power at their disposal. In the north, the Force H had fleet carriers *Ark Royal* and *Victorious*, escort carriers *Argus* and *Avenger*, three battleships, four heavy cruisers and scores of destroyers, with their primary role as covering force for the British landings at Lisbon. Force C in the Canaries had been thinned out, but it still had the carriers *Glorious* and *Furious*, two *Knight Class* heavy cruisers, backed by three more cruisers, *Jamaica*, *Kenya* and *Bermuda*, and a destroyer squadron.

In the south, the Americans would send the carrier *Ranger*, new escort carriers *Sangamon*, *Santee*, *Suwanee*, and *Chenango*, the battleships *Texas*, *Massachusetts* and *New York*, four heavy and two light cruisers, with over 40 pesky destroyers. Rather than being divided in to three groups as in the original plan, this substantial naval force sailed as one massive formation. The carriers had ceaselessly patrolled the skies to eliminate the U-Boat threat, and now the American troop convoy was approaching Casablanca, ready to strike all along the coast of Morocco in one mighty blow. It was this concentration of the American force that would make this attack so potent, and yet so prone to chaos and disorder as had already been seen in exercises and rehearsals.

For their part, the Axis naval forces seemed puny by comparison. *Normandie* was still needing repairs at Toulon, but the alarm sent by Himmler had convinced the French that it might be moved first to Algiers where the remaining work could be completed. Other than that ship, only the battleship *Jean Bart* remained operational at Casablanca, joined by two cruisers and five destroyers. The Germans then had their battlegroup at Gibraltar, consisting of *Kaiser Wilhelm*, *Hindenburg*, and the carriers *Goeben* and *Prinz Heinrich*. The Axis forces were therefore outnumbered six to two in battleships, eleven to two in carriers, and could simply never match the Allies in cruisers and destroyers. In spite of that, the French were at sea that morning, unaware of the storm of steel that was now blowing in from the west.

A supply operation for the Canaries was underway in the south with a group of Siebel ferries and six French transports escorted by the light cruiser *Lannes* and four destroyers. Further north *Jean Bart* had left Casablanca with what was left of the *Force De Raid*. Instead of being little more than a well armored moored shore battery as in the original history, that ship would now operate as a dangerous raider in what might now be the final act of the French Navy in the Atlantic.

The opening shots of the campaign were not fired by any of these ships. It was the eagle eyed Wernet Haupt in morning air flight *Thor* that would start the battle, spotting a British Sunderland over the Fuerteventura Channel and going in to shoot that plane down at a few minutes before ten on the 15th of September. When they heard the Sunderland's 'Mayday' call, the British on Tenerife quickly scrambled a pair of Spitfires in Group Dogrose. They would be too late to save the Sunderland, but would instead find a German Kondor up, and straying uncomfortably close to Force C. The fighters vectored in, and saw the German plane turning and running for the safety of friendly islands. It was not known whether the plane had spotted the British force.

That Kondor would not see anything alarming, but a second plane out of Tangier was up at 11:00 and quickly detected something on radar to the southwest. It turned in the direction of the contact, sending a signal to Casablanca as to the suspected position, which in turn was relayed to *Jean Bart*. At 12:40. The French raiding group executed a 30 point turn to come about on a heading of 285, then came another 30 points to starboard to eventually assume a heading of 315 at a little after noon. They were sailing right into the outliers of the huge American invasion group.

The three contacts that had been detected were the biggest ships in the American covering force, three battleships sailing with an escort of four destroyers from Desron 4. That bold German Kondor then overflowed Desron 15, reporting three destroyers before *Santee* ordered a pair of Wildcats to get after it. Its radar was now picking up contacts all over the sea, and it flashed the urgent warning: *Large convoy spotted – 13:00 hours, heading 100 degrees East—many warships.*

The jig was up.

Desron 4 soon spotted a pair of destroyers to the south, and they turned to engage. At 2:11 local time, DD *Wainright* was the first ship to score a hit, straddling the French destroyer *Fougueux* with its deck guns. The French

ship was badly hit, losing a 130mm gun, a pair of its AA guns and with minor flooding on the bow. Its speed fell off dramatically when the water reached the boiler room amidships and swamped the propulsion plant. *Fougueux* was soon dead in the water, and now the destroyer *Boulonnaise* was also taking a pasting from *Wainright*, which had turned over its initial prey to the able hands of DD *Mayrant*.

The remaining five ships in the French group has formed a wide battle line and fanned out to the northeast. The two destroyers, *Milan* and *Simoun*, rushed to engage the US DDs. Next came *Jean Bart*, deciding to weigh in with her secondary batteries when it was clear that *Fougueux* was sinking. The battleship opened fire on DD *Jenkins*, and that ship would take severe damage, along with *Myrant*, which prompted the remaining two US destroyers to wheel south. They thought they would fare better if they could put the French destroyers between their position and that battleship, and in the ensuing action, *Milan* would go down on the French side, joining *Fougueux* and *Boulonnaise*, and *Myrant* would sink, ending the little destroyer duel when the remaining US destroyers slowed to pick up survivors. Now it was time for the heavy metal.

Jean Bart saw her real foe, the tall silhouette of the leading American battleship, the *Massachusetts* under Captain Whiting. The entire French squadron, only four ships remaining, executed a sharp turn to the north, intending to cross the enemy's T, and *Jean Bart* opened up with her 15-inch guns. *Massachusetts* returned fire, and the first US battleship engagement in the Atlantic was now underway. The French maneuver was correct, but it would be easily countered by the Americans when Whiting ordered his ship to come to 080 degrees northeast. Now he would be able to bring all those big 16-inch guns to bear. Undaunted, *Jean Bart* held her course, and the two supporting cruisers *Gloire* and *Tourville*, increased speed to engage the second tall silhouette, which was the battleship *Texas*. Their smaller guns would be no match for the ten 14-inch guns on the American ship, and *Texas* also had heavy armor, 300mm amidships, with 250mm bulkheads, and 360mm on the face armor of those turrets.

New York was last to arrive, almost due north of the *Massachusetts*. Captain Whiting could see that his faster ship would cut the *New York* off, blocking her sighting of the enemy if he continued on his present course. He therefore ordered an immediate hard turn to starboard, intending to come due

south. This would give *New York* a crack at *Jean Bart*, and the Americans could double team this dangerous ship. He could already see the *Texas* engaging the leading French heavy cruiser, *Tourville*, and now he had every hope that he would prevail in this hot action.

Both sides went at it for another 30 minutes, with the range slowly closing until it was about 6 nautical miles from *Jean Bart* to *New York*. With most of her guns forward, *Jean Bart* shifted fire to the newcomer, as *Massachusetts* was now running southeast, attempting to come around the French ship's stern at about 8 nautical miles. Captain Barthes thought he had hit the American battleship several times, and when he saw it slowing down he hoped one of those hits had penetrated to do some serious damage. In reality, Whiting had only slowed to stabilize his ship after that hard turn, and now increased to 21 knots. Most of his damage was to the twin secondary batteries, and 40mm Bofors. His engineering plant was sound, and all main guns were operational.

That would not be the case for the French ship soon. *Massachusetts* scored a heavy blow amidships, penetrating to the boilers and seriously compromising the steam plant. *Jean Bart* fell off to 12 then 8 knots, taking on water and with heavy damage, as one of the rounds had fallen short, exploding underwater and reaching an unprotected segment of the hull. To make matter worse, *Tourville* had met a similar fate at the hands of the battleship *Texas*. The cruiser was struck by two 14-inch rounds right on her superstructure near the stacks, but more serious damage from an earlier hit beneath the waterline had put her into a list. The cruiser keeled over, foundering in the moderate swells under a heavy pall of black smoke.

Now heavily outgunned, *Jean Bart* would not survive. Captain Barthes felt his ship taking one heavy blow after another, and at three PM local time, he finally gave the order to abandon ship. Eighteen minutes later, the brave French battleship began to sink, and seeing this, both light cruiser *Gloire* and the destroyer *Simoun* broke off, running for the safety of Casablanca. They would later make a run for Gibraltar and the safety of the Med, along with the few French destroyers that remained in the Atlantic.

This hard fought action by the US Navy would prove their mettle, and metal as well. For the loss of the destroyer *Myrant*, with minor damage on the three US battleships and destroyer *Jenkins*, they had savaged the French DDs, sinking three of the four—then the battleships had finished the job. It would

be the only serious challenge at sea to the Allied fleets, and the death knell of the *Force de Raid*. Once the combined Franco-German fleet had been powerful enough to match and hurt the best the Royal Navy could throw at them, but the heavy losses they sustained off Fuerteventura had seriously reduced their fighting power.

The news of the defeat would fall heavily on Vice Admiral Michelier, the naval commander ashore at Casablanca. It would ripple through the wires to reach Admiral Laborde aboard the *Normandie* at Algiers, now the last of the once proud line of French battleships. Dark thoughts entered his mind about what was now underway, and the same shadow fell heavily on the thoughts of the German Admiral Raeder.

A battle was coming that now threatened to collapse the entire Axis position in the Atlantic and Western Med, everything Raeder had labored to build. He had seized Gibraltar, driving the Royal Navy before him. He had faced them down in one engagement after another, his ships wreaking havoc and also delivering a glittering prize that he had yet to fully measure. But now, the Allies were striking directly at the two vital naval bases that allowed him to sustain operations, Gibraltar and Casablanca.

Without those ports, he would be driven into the Central Med, and forced to operate out of Toulon. As reports came in on the movements of Force H, he realized that his remaining operational ships, those two precious carriers and his prized *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Hindenburg*, would now be in a fight for their lives against the whole of the combined Anglo-American fleet.

Should I withdraw to Toulon, he asked himself? Should I keep these ships here in the Med, join the *Normandie*, and anything left in the Italian Navy to make sure we can defend the sea lanes to Rommel? That would be the only course I could set to defend my overall strategy, but that leaves our hard won position in the Canary Islands a lost cause.

He shrugged, a heaviness of heart settling on him now. A storm was coming, he could feel it impending on him like bad weather, and it would be a wall of steel ships, drawing ever nearer with each passing moment. His own battlegroup had sortied from Gibraltar, charging out through the narrow straits like knights emerging from a castle, but soon that castle would be under siege. He had little doubt as to where the invasion was heading—Casablanca. And the French division there wasn't going to stop it, he realized. There was only one German division close enough to matter, near

Marrakesh, just getting off the trains to head south to reinforce Operation Condor.

Yet they will never get there now, he knew. They will have to be sent to Casablanca, and even then, the Americans could land north of the city, cutting those troops off, and we have nothing to really stop them from sweeping up the coast to Tangier. And the British have landed in Portugal!

Damn, he thought, we knew this was coming, but now that the hour is upon us, look how badly positioned we are to defend against this attack. Damn Hitler and his obsession with Russia. He's left Rommel with five divisions, and Kesselring here with five more to defend all of Spain, and North Africa. How many divisions are they coming with? Is this a raid, or is it a heavy landing with the intention of knocking the French out of this war. Yes... the French. They were already waffling after the heavy losses at Fuerteventura. I asked for the *Normandie*, and Admiral Laborde delayed just long enough to keep that ship out of play here. Can he be relied on? And what about the remaining French ships at Toulon?

So do I stay here, and fight for my Mediterranean strategy, or do I send the *Hindenburg* group home... assuming they could even reach a German port safely? That would at least give me a superb naval force in the north to operate out of Nordstern. It would be enough to stop those convoys to Murmansk and strangle Soviet Russia. But if I do that, I leave another orphan in Toulon, the *Bismarck*. She will be laid up for many more months, and if the French collapse....

Which is the stronger play? Should I use our remaining naval assets to choke the sea lanes feeding the Soviets, or use them instead to make certain we can hold our own sea lanes open for Rommel? Which battle matters more? If I stand a watch here, we might delay the Allied movement into the Western Med, keep the French fighting for Algeria and Tunisia, and protect Rommel's back, because I know what the British will want next—Malta. Yes, they'll want Malta and Oran, and Algiers and Bizerte and Tunis. They'll want to run the table and sweep us right out of the game. If they do that, Rommel is doomed. He will either lose his entire army or be forced to withdraw to Sicily. Then that is where the Allies will come next, to get after Italy. Either that or they will land in Southern France to knock the Vichy Government out of the war. My God, that's a lot to lose to close those convoy routes in the north.

That decided his mind.

With *Jean Bart* lost, he thought, and Casablanca under imminent attack, my only strategy would be to fight here in the Med. If we run for home now, it will only undermine the morale of the French further. So we stay, and we fight. I will issue recall orders for the *Hindenburg* Group immediately. They will return—but not to Gibraltar. I will want them move quickly to Oran, and from there, we may have enough to keep the Allies from thinking about a sortie into the Western Med.

It was then that the telephone rang on his desk. He lifted the receiver, wondering, and heard a dry cold voice that he recognized all too well—Himmler. “*Admiral Raeder*,” it said.

“Yes, this is Raeder.”

“*Anton is coming to dinner. Lila should be there to meet him.*”

That was all he said, hanging up the phone before Raeder could speak a single word.

My God, he thought. It is far worse than I imagined.

He knew exactly what Himmler was referring to. Case Anton was the German plan to seize Vichy France in the event of French cooperation with the Allies overseas. Operation Lila was the plan to seize all that was left of the French Navy at Toulon. Himmler was warning him these operations were now to be put in motion. It was all collapsing, everything he had striven for. It was all twisting in the wind now.

It suddenly occurred to him that the subtle movement of the *Normandie* from Toulon to Algiers might have darker implications. What was Laborde up to? All the eggs had been safe in the nest at Toulon, save one, the pride of the French Navy. He picked up the telephone again.

“Get me Kapitan Adler on the *Hindenburg*.”

Chapter 21

The British had no difficulties at all in their landings at Lisbon. It was only a question of how fast the dockyards could receive the men and equipment. As this wing of the Torch plan was never tried in the real history, it received a new commander as well, a General very eager to continue writing his name in the record books. After saving Tobruk from Rommel, and saving Singapore from the Japanese, if only for a few crucial weeks, Montgomery had returned to the 8th Army, chafing to get more than the infantry under his command. When he learned that his old 3rd Division had been selected to take part in the Torch operation, he put in a request with Brooke to see about a posting to that action. It would be the order of the day, get him back in the limelight, and out of the considerable shadow that General O'Connor cast in the 8th Army order of battle. So his old post was given to General Alexander, and off he went.

The plan was for the heavy armor to land at Lisbon, then quickly commandeered trains that the Portuguese had been quietly moving to the outskirts of the city. A cover story about work on a bridge causing a backlog was put out to mask the buildup, and it fooled everyone except Himmler. Unfortunately, Himmler could not convince Goring that he should violate neutral Portuguese airspace and bomb those valuable train cars and engines, and Goring would not act unless he received specific orders from Hitler. So 6th Armored Division was going to get ashore, and by the time they arrived, the skies above the port were seething with every fighter the British could bring on their aircraft carriers, with hundreds more landing on Portuguese airfields.

One thing the British had mastered in the early years of the war was the art of rapid forward deployment for the RAF squadrons assigned to support the campaign. They realized that fighters would govern the front, and a preponderance of fighter aircraft was an absolute necessity. The ratio would be at least four for every bomber, and preferably six. The initial cover would be provided by the FAA, but as soon as possible, Spitfire squadrons would be rushed to Portuguese airfields from England. Number 322 and 324 Squadrons would be the first to arrive, and where they could operate from good bases,

the *Stuka* was dead. Those two groups brought in 72 Spitfires, and soon they ruled the roost over Lisbon.

The 43rd Wessex landed quickly with the armor, and advanced up the rail lines towards Madrid. There they would be opposed by the first of three German divisions that would react to the invasion, the 337th Infantry. It had been assigned to 7th Army headquartered in Bordeaux for some time, but was about to get its first real combat experience, at least for most of the men in the division at that time. The man in charge, however, General Eric Marcks, had been blooded in Russia, commanding the 101st Light Division, so he knew what he was doing. He left a leg in Russia, replaced with a wooden prosthesis, and it seemed like he was put out to pasture with the 337th. Now he was front and center in the war on the emerging "Second Front."

Coming from Madrid by rail, the 337th detrained near the Portuguese border and sent its recon battalion across to scout out the situation. There it ran into Montgomery, who had come forward to look over the ground near the border, and with him he had the whole of 129th Brigade, including a battalion of the new Churchill tanks from the 34th Armored Brigade attached to the Wessex Division. He was spoiling for a fight, and determined to be the man who returned Gibraltar to the Crown. True to form, he waited to deploy two regiments of the division artillery before he launched a full brigade assault on the German 327th Recon Battalion.

The Germans there had a high proportion of veterans that had rotated in from the Soviet front, and those men held their ground tenaciously, then began a well coordinated and very stubborn withdrawal. It was typical Monty, using the mass of his brigade as a weapon of attrition, but the Germans had fought on much more difficult ground in Russia, and they acquitted themselves well.

Meanwhile, the British 6th Armored Division had taken the trains from Lisbon south, along the rail that passed east of Lagos and then ran along the southern coast towards the border. It was here that Hube's 16th Panzer Division had arrived on the scene after a long rail march along the eastern coast of Spain, through Barcelona, Valencia, Murcia to Malaga and thence through Cordoba to Seville and the Portuguese border on the southern coast just west of the small port of Huelva. The rapidity of this move was due to well practiced experience on the dismal rail net in Russia, and in making it, the Germans had successfully covered Cadiz, and the airfield at Rota.

The bulk of Hube's division concentrated near the coast road and rail. He deployed all four of his Panzergrenadier battalions there, with both his Panzer battalions, and they ran head on into the entire British 6th Armored Division coming up the coast by both road and rail. The action was fought for the coastal town of Villa Real, and extended some 15 kilometers to the north, and it was like two knights jousting in armor, with both striking telling blows, and both sides would have dented shields and armor before it would be decided.

In the south, the US landings were every bit the fine mess that men like Patton, Harmon and others expected. The plan had been altered to lead with the 1st US Infantry, perhaps the best trained unit in the army. It was going to put its 18th and 26th regimental Combat Teams ashore to seize Rabat and Port Lyautey some 80 kilometers northeast of Casablanca. The 26th landed at Mehdia, stormed inland and took its objective. The 18th, however, came in hard at Rabat, took that town, driving out the 2nd Zouave Regiment in the process, and then milled about, trying to sort through crates of weapons and supplies, re-assemble mixed up companies, while one battalion was still foundering about in the high surf. The regiment was leaderless, because its commanding officer, had landed somewhere else.

The naval transport he was on got fouled up with elements of the 16th RCT, which had been tasked with taking Port Lasfar and El Jadida, nearly 100 kilometers southwest of Casablanca. Colonel Greer had been squinting at the shoreline, then staring at his map. He should be seeing the river mouth near Rabat, but the only report of an estuary was indicating it was 20 kilometers farther north.

"That can't be right," he growled. "The goddamn town is right there. Just put us ashore." It wasn't until he slogged off his LVT, waded ashore, and made his way into that town, that he learned where he was. To his great surprise, he bumped into soldier wearing the shoulder patch of the 16th RCT. He was 180 kilometers southeast of his regiment, and when Patton found him, coming ashore at El Jadida, he read him the riot act, ordered him to get back on anything that would float, and get his ass up to Rabat on the double.

Those two small ports were just big enough to get elements of Task Force Red ashore, with much needed supporting armor. With Patton there, this "mess," as he first saw it, was quickly sorted out, and he was personally directing traffic with his riding crop pointing out where he wanted the units to go—northeast, to Casablanca.

It was then that a fateful decision was made on the part of the defending forces. Reports had been coming in to Kesselring all morning, and now he had a fairly good idea of where the main landings were, to either side of Casablanca. But there was one other raid mounted much farther south at Safi. There Lt. Colonel Rosenfeld had made a pre-dawn assault to seize the small port and the airfield about 4 kilometers north at Sidi Bou Zid.

This port had two direct rail lines coming to it, one from Marrakech to the southeast, and another spur to the north from the main rail line from that city to Casablanca. It was there, at Marrakech, that a French Division was posted as a standing garrison unit, but the German 327th Division had just arrived the day before the invasion. It was to wait there for its supplies arriving the next day before moving to the coast with orders to eventually be transported by sea to take over garrison duty on the three German held islands in the Canaries. This would allow General Kubler to then mount his next offensive move against the British bastion of Tenerife.

But that would never happen now.

When word came in of the landing at Safi, the immediate reaction was for the 327th to move there, but Kesselring intervened. "No," he said to a staff adjutant. "From all reports, there is only a single regiment landed at Safi. The French Marrakech Division can go there by road and retake those ports. Send orders for the 327th to get back on those trains and head north for Casablanca. I will see that the division supplies are re-routed as well."

This intervention was going to give the Axis forces their only chance at making a credible defense at the vital Atlantic port. Even as Patton was lashing trucks and armored cars with his riding crop, pushing them northeast, the Germans were riding the rails north, and the two forces would have a meeting engagement when the Americans finally had pushed up to approach the rail line to Marrakech.

The 327th Division had been formed in Bavaria in 1940 and was sent to France as a garrison unit, quartered near La Rochelle before it was tapped for deployment to Morocco. It moved through Vichy France to Toulon, embarked there and landed at Oran. From there it had moved by rail through Fez to Marrakech. Equipped as a second tier division, it was deemed ready for defensive actions, looking forward to the balmy Canary Island posting when the new orders came in. Major General Theodore Fischer had just taken command, and now he was to find his unit thrust into the crucible of Patton's

“desperate venture.” When light tanks were reported approaching the rail line, Fischer stopped the train and immediately ordered his division to deploy. The troops were literally jumping from the train cars as the American forces approached.

Tireless, Fischer simply deployed his battalions from the march and ordered them to attack west. They ran right into the 16th RCT with its supporting light tanks and mechanized forces from Task forces Green and Red. These were all forces that would have made the landing at Oran in the old history. Now they were writing it all anew.

The presence of that division was a saving grace to the defenders of Casablanca, for it looked as though Patton would simply sweep up and take the city from the south until the Americans ran into that line of feldgrau deployed all along the rail line leading south.

* * *

Now a decision had to be made as to what would happen with the German position in the Canary Islands. Admiral Raeder had already made his choice as to where he would put his remaining naval assets, and he knew that unless this invasion at Casablanca was soundly defeated, Operation Condor was now doomed.

“A second American infantry division is now landing north of Casablanca near Fedala,” he told Kesselring. “The 327th arrived just in time to hold off the attack from the south, but I do not think they will stop this invasion alone. That being the case, what do we do about Operation Condor? I can tell you right now, that I can no longer supply those troops. The delivery being made this morning will probably be the last, and I do not think Goring will be able to use his transports to airlift supplies either. The British are moving in Spitfires, and our control of the air is now well contested. If Casablanca falls, that entire position falls with it.”

“Then we must get the troops out now,” said Kesselring. “Kubler was organizing for an attack on Tenerife, but that must be cancelled immediately. Instead, he can mount those troops on the ships you just sent to deliver supplies, and withdraw to Morocco. The same for all the air transports now mustered on those islands.”

“The airlift to Morocco would be a dangerous move.”

“We will simply have to risk it.”

“And Hitler?” said Raeder, his message obvious.

“Damn Hitler,” said Kesselring. “If we ask for permission, you know what he will say. But those troops are elite fighting forces, the only air mobile divisions in the army. To leave them to wither on the vine out there would be criminal! If, however, we can move them quickly to Morocco, then they can strike north. We will leave a small garrison on the islands. Hitler does not need to know we have withdrawn the bulk of those troops. We will merely say that certain elements have been dispatched to retake Safi. But I want the 2nd Luftland Division, and 7th Flieger, out of there—now. Kubler’s mountain regiment will go by sea, and we will leave it to him as to what garrison he can leave behind.”

“The British will take them all back in short order,” said Raeder dejectedly. “Everything we fought for.”

“In time,” said Kesselring. “But not until the outcome of this big invasion is determined. They won’t have the shipping to conduct landing in Portugal, Morocco and the Canaries as well. So we will hold those islands long enough to keep the Führer from exploding, and when the British do take them back, that will be the fortunes of war.”

“There is no rail connection north from the southern airfields. The nearest rail line will be at Safi.”

“Then that is our first objective.” Kesselring took off his gloves, leaning over the map. Then he offered up his patented smile. “So the war in the West has finally begun.”

With that decision, Raeder’s dream of holding that knife at the jugular of the British convoy routes to Freetown and beyond would now evaporate. Dönitz would no longer be able to slip his U-boats quietly into Fuerteventura to refuel under the reassuring umbrella of German air cover. Instead, the FAA and RAF would roost on those islands, and make all the waters in every direction a no man’s land for the wolfpacks. That was a major strategic loss insofar as the battle for the Atlantic was concerned.

The loss of Gibraltar certainly stung, but in its place, the British now had a growing military presence in the Azores, on Madeira at Funchal Harbor, and in the Canaries where two Brigades of the 78th Division were still digging in on Tenerife and La Palma.

Soon FAA recon operations would begin to spot the German withdrawals.

General Kubler was at the Grand Harbor when he got the order to get his men out. The small supply convoy was already in the harbor, but the boats would never be unloaded. Raeder's little supply fleet had been making night runs out to the islands, mostly using Siebel ferries from Tan Tan and Tarfaya. But these were larger ships provided by the French and Italians, and the Germans needed to get them moving fast if they wanted to be safely away before dawn. Frustrated and angry, he reluctantly passed the order on to his three battalion commanders.

We fight like hell for these islands, he thought, never get the naval support promised, and only half the air support we need, I take the lion's share here, and now I must throw all that red meat back to the British. So now we go back to Morocco, back to the desert, and this news of an Allied landing at Casablanca is behind all this. Something tells me we will be fighting our way north soon, and through some of the worst terrain in Africa.

Ordered to leave some garrison capable of defending the island, he gave the assignment to his Pioneer battalion, knowing he would probably never see any of those men again. They had come here, flush with victory, but as Kubler made his last rounds on Gran Canaria, driving the entire coast road to look over the defensive positions, he had the haunting thought that, with this withdrawal, his men would now move from one defensive fight to another.

The Americans, he thought. Now that they have come, this war will look very much different. Now we fight not simply to win, but to survive.

Part VIII

Lighting the Torch

“Use steamroller strategy; that is, make up your mind on course and direction of action, and stick to it. But in tactics, do not steamroller. Attack weakness. Hold them by the nose and kick them in the pants... If you don’t succeed, I don’t want to see you alive. I see no point in surviving defeat, and I am sure that if all of you enter into battle with equal resolution, we shall conquer, and live long, and gain more glory.”

— General George Patton

Addressing the troops prior to landings for Operation Torch.

Chapter 22

With Patton heavily engaged with the 327th Infantry south of the city, it was the 3rd US Infantry Division that would land the next blow, arriving off Fedala and points northwest on D+3. It had come all the way across the Atlantic from US ports. Roosevelt and Greer, with two thirds of Allen's 1st Division at Rabat and Port Lyautey, would be glad to see them come, for they had been unable to push the French north or open the road to Tangier, and it was all they could do to simply hold the port and airfield. But first 3rd Infantry had to get ashore.

The point chosen near Fedala on the coast just north of Casablanca, was selected because it had good sandy beaches to either side of the town. The small Mellah River wound its way through tidal flats and marshy ground to the sea, just south of the town itself, and its small harbor was protected by a stony headland, Cap de Fedala, and an 800 foot jetty. This had been the place 3rd Division landed in Fedorov's history, and it was happening again here, with uncanny similarity, a piece of the shattered mirror large enough to reflect the events he might have known.

Amazingly, the French had very little in the way of defenses there. They had reacted to the landings at Safi, and Rabat, also historical assault locations, and then to Patton's little innovation in landing at El Jadida. That is where most of the city's defenders had concentrated, as well as all the arriving German 327th Infantry Division. Yet none of these assaults were the main attack. That was to be delivered by the 3rd Infantry Division, dubbed Force Brushwood under Major General Jonathan W. Anderson.

This division was supposed to land on day 1 of the plan, but shortages of shipping delayed its departure, as well as a cautious re-direction in the Atlantic to avoid suspected U-boats. So it was coming in 48 hours after the battle had begun, the hammer that was supposed to smash French resistance and take Casablanca. It would start with good fire support from the cruisers *Brooklyn* and *Augusta*, the latter being Patton's flagship. They would be ready to take on three French shore batteries, a pair of 76mm guns on Cap de Fedala, four more 100mm guns at the base of that headland, and a more powerful bastion known as Batterie du Pont farther north on a rocky headland

near the village of Cherqui. They were all protected by MG pits, a few flak guns, and there were still a few French destroyers in Casablanca that could always make a run at those landings. But it would not be the French resistance that would complicate those landings, but the sea and shoreline itself.

The British had long ago warned the Americans about the heavy surf on the Atlantic coast. If the troops could all land on the designated sandy beaches, U.S. planners deemed the risk acceptable. As it was, the nightmares experienced by Harmon when he rehearsed his landings all began to play out for General Anderson and his 3rd Division. The landing boats were slow to load, the men lumbering down the nets, all heavily laden with heavy packs and other equipment. The boats, when they finally started to make the three mile run into the shore, would invariably drift off their assigned approach path. Many landed on the wrong beaches, with boats carrying command elements seeing men of a different battalion landing on their beach. Those were the lucky ones. Others drifted as far off as 10,000 yards from their designated landing point.

The coastline these wayward boats encountered was not sandy beaches. There were rocky outcrops, reefs, marshy tidal flats, all conspiring to lure the landing boats in, which seemed all too eager to get to any spit of land they could see in the dark. The rough seas then tossed many of the boats onto those rocks, capsized others, and many men sank in the high surf with their heavy packs, and drowned. These casualties were not heavy, but the loss in landing boats was. One battalion had come in on 37 boats, and only two survived intact, making it back to the transports. All the rest had been capsized, run aground on rocks, with others stuck in the mud flats, unable to restart their engines.

The 2nd wave of the attack was waiting for those boats to return, and, with that kind of attrition, they found they had only 60% of the boats required. So the whole landing schedule went to hell in the surf.

As the first wave came ashore, the men struggling to realize whether they were on the correct beach or not, the French turned on searchlights and started firing machine guns, and it is remarkable that men under fire soon realize there's a war on, and start to react. Officers shouted orders, commandeered any men at hand, and began organizing assault teams. Their mission was to get to the base of that headland and get after those shore

batteries before daylight, with only 45 minutes of darkness remaining.

The fear of those guns was over inflated. The planners had trained a special recon team, all dressed in jet black uniforms, and they were to come in on rubber rafts and hit the guns in the dark. Yet the landings were so jumbled up, that they didn't arrive until twenty minutes after dawn. Now they would have to make the attack on the well lit, sun swept beach, against those French rifle pits and flak guns, and none of them had trained for that. The officer in charge shrugged, cursed his bad luck, and instead of changing the plan and organizing an attack, he simply led his men back into their rafts and they all paddled out to sea to their transport.

That was what green, untested men might do in first combat. It was men learning how to be soldiers, almost to a man, forming companies and learning how to become a battalion, forming battalions and learning how to become regiments, a division, an army. This was the first dawn of the long crusade ahead of them. If Patton had been there, he might have sent them the other way, but he was now on a boat himself, leaving the stalemated bridgehead south of Casablanca and heading back to *Augusta*.

So while some men failed when their plans were upset by these ill timed landings, others took actions they were never meant to perform. Small groups of men made attacks on those French guns, enough to silence them until the navy could weigh in with support fire. Some were taken by that first wave, and just after dawn, the American cruisers put accurate fire on the enemy occupied headlands, silencing the guns there almost before they had a chance to open fire. One battery stopped firing at the Americans but would not surrender. It took direct mortar fire and rounds from two Pak 75mm howitzers to compel them to end their resistance.

The cruiser duel with the shore batteries did cause one other mishap. When Patton arrived at *Augusta*, piped aboard by sailors eager to impress, the cruiser made a point of blasting away with its main guns at enemy AA gun positions and those shore batteries. So much so that a battalion ashore had to call on the radio and ask them to stop. The concussion from one salvo blew a boat containing most of the General's personal belongings right off the deck, and it fell into the sea in pieces.

Patton took it in stride, for moments before the men had fetched his ivory handled pistols in a box from that very launch, because he wanted to show them to the ship's Captain. They were the one thing he salvaged from the

incident, that and the honor of being the first American General to land on two assault beaches in the same operation. He was going ashore to personally sort out the mess at Fedala, and get the men moving on their objectives. Before noon he had done exactly that, and the French would soon find a tide of khaki and olive green coming down on Casablanca from the north.

“Get your men inland,” he shouted at any Captain or Colonel he came upon. “ You! Line up your battalion right here. The rest fall in on your left, and be goddamned quick about it! We’re going to roll on in and take that city like a tidal wave. Be ready to attack by 14:00.”

Units of the 30th Regiment had landed farthest north, and they would soon push up towards Rabat to try and shake loose things there. Colonel Greer’s 18th RLT had been bogged down in Rabat itself, his men fighting house to house against the 2nd French Zuave Regiment. The 30th RLT from the 3rd Division was a most welcome sight when it came up from the south to take the pressure off and flank that enemy defense. The other two Regiments, 15th and 7th, had turned south for Casablanca.

Off to the south, the real trouble spot was at Safi, and it was getting worse by the hour. The Marrakesh Division had finally reached the scene in force, its commander, Major General Henri Martin eager for a fight. He set up headquarters in a small village southeast of Safi along the rail line, and gathered field reports, eventually determining he was looking at a regimental sized landing force. The Americans had the town, port, and airfield, but the fortified outpost just south of Safi, El Houdi, was still in French hands.

The Germans had moved swiftly to abandon their hard won prize in the Canary Islands. The six transports that Raeder had sent three days earlier were just in time to receive Kubler’s tough mountain regiment. Two others, and several Siebel ferries, called on Fuerteventura and their decks and holds were soon crammed with troops and equipment from the 22nd Air Landing Division. Meindel’s Sturm Regiment would go by air, but not without losses when Allied fighter patrols found some of those planes. The order had come on the first day of the invasion. Three days later, the bulk of the German fighting troops on those islands had successfully evacuated.

Force C had learned of the move too late to intervene that first night when Kubler slipped away. On the second night they were ready to interdict any further withdrawal, but no enemy shipping was found. The German fighter cover was thick, still more than a match for the British in this sector, as the

weight of most German air power had been concentrated in the south. Thus the bulk of all those airlifts were successful, and Goring remarked that it could have been much worse if the Allies had concentrated more carrier based fighters here. Instead, they had opted to cover their all important landing operation, believing the small lodgment at Safi was enough of a delaying force to prevent any quick German movement north.

Kubler took his 98th Mountain Regiment into two small ports, Essaouria, about 110 kilometers south of Safi, and Agadair, another 130 kilometers south. The airlifts first shuttled to all the southern airfields the Germans had used, Tan Tan, El Aioun, Tarfaya, Sidi Ifini, and Goulimine. From there they refueled, and took on anything else in the way of men and field equipment that they could cram onto the planes. All trucks and other transport took the rest and started up the long dusty roads of Morocco. In the dark of the night, with confusion, units scattered and mixed, officers sometimes working at cross purposes, it was difficult for the men to have any sense that this was a redeployment, as the order had read. In their hearts, they knew it for what it was, a retreat, and one with an edge of desperation that drove it on through the cold desert tracks.

Their grand adventure was over, but 48 hours later, as the columns and planes snaked and flew north, they would slowly muster south of Safi, where Kesselring had placed a heavy finger on the map, demanding that place be retaken at once.

So it was that the 39th RLT of the 9th Division would soon be in a fight for its life. General Harmon's Blackstone Force had landed there in the old history, but he was farther north in that bridgehead south of Casablanca. So the 39th came in here, a unit that would have landed at Algiers in the original plan. They were doing exactly what they had been sent there to do, but it soon dawned on the men that they had, in fact, been the one bone the Allies would throw to the wolves in this affair.

Their position was already surrounded on all sides, though the route north of the airfield at Sidi Bou Zid was still only lightly defended. Colonel Caffey got on the radio and reported his situation—objectives taken, but under growing enemy pressure. The Marrakech Division was just the leading edge of that storm. By the 20th of September, D+5 since the Lisbon landings, and D+3 since Caffey and his men had fought their way ashore and into Safi, the first column of German troops were starting to arrive from those two ports to

the south.

The lead unit was the 22nd Recon Battalion of the Luftland Division, and Student with the HQ of 7th Flieger Korps. It had two companies of motorcycle troops, and some light vehicles that had come over on a Siebel Ferry forming a third company of armored cars. Behind that came three battalions of Fallschirmjagers, and then Kubler's regiment, strung out in widely spaced groups, some 60 kilometers to the south. General Martin would be very glad to introduce them to one Major Griggs of the 3rd Battalion Landing Team, 39th Regiment. The American officer had taken to a jeep early on the afternoon of the first day, and slipped south along the course of a small river to scout out the terrain. Now he was a prisoner, and apparently talking freely, though everything he was saying was a load of guff.

"Just you wait," he told the General. "We've come with half a million men up north, and 500 planes—scores of fighting ships as well. You haven't seen anything yet." The fact was that they had come with 112,000 men, and about 160 carrier based planes. His brag on the Navy was closer to the truth.

Kurt Student had been on the islands to oversee that last offensive into Tenerife and La Palma. Now he was leading this retreat, and none too happy about it. He came tramping in with Meindel, tired, dirty, his uniform covered with road dust. It was not what he thought he would be doing that day, and the first thing on his mind now was not Major Griggs, but information.

"Mon General," said Martin, squinting at Student like he was a vagabond or desert tramp. "A long night's march I see. You will be pleased to know I have an American officer here."

"Good for you," said Student in French. "You arrived here by rail?"

"Some units. Others made the march by road."

"Are those trains still here?"

"For the most part. In fact, one of your battalions apparently air lifted to Marrakech, and it has just brought in another small train, arriving only hours ago."

"Good. Will you take Safi?"

The General smiled, thinking that a certainty now with all these German troops at hand. "Of course," he said, "first thing in the morning. You will want dinner, and a little rest, Yes?"

"That I will," said Student. "And then I will want those trains, all of them."

We are going back to Marrakech, and from there north to Fez.”

General Martin raised an eyebrow at that. “You will not fight here, at Safi?”

“You take it. First thing in the morning. What we want here is the rail line to get up north, and thankfully, you’ve already got that. Good job, Mon General. I will see about getting you a medal. Take Safi and you can have another.” Student tipped his dusty cap, and strode out into the night to look for those trains.

General Martin blinked. There were five or six enemy ships off shore, and they had been pounding his positions all that afternoon. Some ally we have here, he thought. At least the British fought side by side with us in France. Well Herr General Student, you will not get to Fez on those trains, because the rail line runs right through Casablanca, from all accounts the Americans have already cut that line at Rabat. If you don’t already know that, you will learn about it soon enough... First thing in the morning.

Chapter 23

General Kurt Student got the news late that night. On the telephone to Kesselring in Fez, he also learned that the Americans had landed yet another division north of Fedala, and it was investing Casablanca from the north, sweeping the French resistance before it. As there was no sign of any direct attack on the port, Major General Lascroux moved several battalions from the city defenses to that flank in an attempt to stem the American tide. But the troops presently there did not look like they could hold out without substantial reinforcements. Now Kesselring had to make a very tough decision.

“Do we fight for Casablanca?” Student asked on the phone.

“How soon could you get there?”

“The French left enough rolling stock here to move a couple regiments, but the Luftland Division is strung out on the roads south. They will be days getting up to the rail line. Kubler is arriving here this morning.”

“What can you move by air?”

“One good regiment, perhaps four or five battalions.”

“Then get them to Fez, and go there yourself, by any means possible. I’m afraid that means a long march, and over difficult roads.”

“Then you don’t want Casablanca?”

“Oh, I would love to save it for Raeder, but let’s face facts. Even if you had all your troops there now, the best we could hope for is a stalemate. I sent the 327th there from Marrakech two days ago. They stopped the southern enemy landings, but they cannot push them back. With your troops, perhaps we could defeat that part of their landings, but I am told more armor is starting to come ashore at Rabat and on the beaches north of Fedala. Herr General, we are not going to stop them at Casablanca, and considering that port is of no use to us at all now, I’m ordering the 327th to pull out as well. They will take the trains they came in on. There is a rail spur into the mining region near Ques Zemand Bourjad. From there it’s an overland march to El Borouj, and then a very long way to Fez. Get as many men out by air as you can.”

“You mean to build up at Fez to cover Tangier?”

“Possibly, but more likely we will be covering Algeria.”

“What’s happening in Spain?”

“Fighting all along the frontier. We’ve identified at least three British Divisions there, but we have three of our own, so the situation is stable.”

“The Führer has authorized this withdrawal?”

There was a long pause on the line before Kesselring came back. “Just get your men to Fez, and let me worry about the Führer.”

“Herr General,” said Student. “I will do as you order, but something tells me you will be worrying about the Führer for a good long while after this.”

Not even Smiling Al could crack a grin with that thought.

* * *

The stalemate around Casablanca was slowly shifting as more and more US troops landed. Safi had been left to hold out on its own. Everything left was going to Fedala and Rabat. The plan had always been to weight as much of the attack as possible north of the city, and with all of 3rd Division ashore by D+5, the pressure on the Fedala front redoubled. Disengaging in the face of an enemy attack was perhaps the most difficult thing you could ask your troops to do, and for the 327th, Patton’s ever present ardor for battle was making their day a nightmare. He had been on the radio, exhorting that flank to push harder. Some of the German units were able to pull off the line,

others fought a stubborn delaying action. About 60% of the division would get safely back to those trains and on their way into the mountains, and it would be a week to ten days before they might reach Fez.

The next train coming up from the Safi area was carrying more of Kubler's troops. It found the rail line cut and torn to pieces about 20 kilometers south of the vital junction to that rail spur east into the mountains. An enterprising mobile AA unit had broken off from Patton's extreme right flank, ordered to scout south for any sign of an enemy buildup. The Lieutenant in charge saw that rail line and had the presence of mind to tear it up. So the Germans had to literally backtrack to the rail bridge over the river flowing down from Massira lake, detrain there, and then begin moving by road into the long valley that stretched east in the shadow of those highlands.

As for the Luftland Division, part of one regiment was with Kubler and some were following the valley route, but at least five battalions were still stranded on the coast. They were ordered to concentrate at Agadair, where the Luftwaffe assembled as many air transports as possible under heavy fighter cover. From there they would fly over the Atlas mountains to Ifrane Airfield south of Fez.

At the same time, German air power that had been concentrated in the south began leap-frogging from one airfield to another, always north towards Marrakech and Fez. The fighters concentrated on keeping that vital air corridor open, the *Stukas*, Do-17s and JU-88s did all they could to harass enemy movement on the ground. While Allied air power was now about 35% stronger than German assets in theater, it was spread out from Lisbon to Safi, and so this concentration of Luftwaffe forces around Marrakech gave them a local superiority to protect the troops flying north.

As Student had feared, Hitler was eventually informed of these moves, and his reaction was a predictable explosion at OKW. In one brief week he was seeing a position his troops had striven to secure for months collapse. To soften the blow, he was told the Canaries were secure, and that Kesselring's movement of troops north was entirely aimed at cutting off the Allied move toward Tangier. The first was a lie, for the only thing preventing 110 Force on Tenerife from launching an immediate assault on Gran Canaria was the lack of shipping required. The second line might hold true, depending on how many men Kesselring could get north, and how fast they could get there.

It was then that more bad news arrived. The British had pulled off yet

another amphibious landing north of Cadiz, directly on Spanish territory. Hube's 16th Panzer Division had held his line on the Portuguese frontier for the last week near Villa Real. The British 6th Armored division could not move him, for 'Der Mench' was implacable on defense when so minded. But Montgomery then brought up two brigades from 3rd Division, and all the tanks he could get from 33rd and 34th Armored Brigades. He concentrated them at Minas Sao Domingos, a mining region about 45 kilometers north of the coast, and pushed hard.

At the same time, the British threw in their last remaining reserve, the 11th Brigade from 78th Infantry Division. It had been destined to reinforce its brothers on Tenerife, but was held in the Azores as a local reserve for TORCH. There were excellent beaches south of the small Spanish port of Huelva, though they had been eliminated from the planning due to their proximity to German air power at Gibraltar and the fact that there were heavy marshes inland to the east. It was thought that any force landing there would be easily bottled up, and could not move east to Sevilla or south to Cadiz. But suddenly, these same liabilities became assets.

"Look here," said Monty. "We've enough air power here to cover a small brigade scale landing operation. And that marshland acts as a shield to protect the right flank of anything we put there. Those troops can land, take Huelva, and cut the 16th Panzer Division off at the roots. At the same time, we'll make our big push further north." He illustrated with both arms, forming a pincer movement. "They'll either have to withdraw from Villa Real, or we'll have them in a nice little pocket."

Monty's plan would work. Hube's division, facing a full armored division reinforced by three more brigades, could not also cover Huelva and contain that landing. 'Der Mench' had no choice but to withdraw, his men hard pressed and weary from almost continuous fighting. Montgomery had tapped that panzer division as the one force in Spain he had to meet and defeat, and he was applying a strategy that would serve him well throughout the war, steady, relentless attrition. He had thinned out his lines to the north along the frontier to achieve this concentration of force, and it worked.

Still wearing his desert beret, he grinned when he got the news that the Germans had pulled out of Villa Real. "Has Patton taken Casablanca yet?" he asked.

"No sir, but he has the city cut off and surrounded now. It's only a matter

of time.”

“Good. Then we’ll use that time to get to Gibraltar first!”

* * *

On the 22nd of September, V Battalion, 7th Flieger, was the first German unit from the south to reach Fez. Smiling Albert Kesselring came out to shake hands with the Colonel in charge, then told him his journey was not yet over. He wanted him on the next train west through Meknes, then north towards the coast to bolster the French position north of Port Lyautey. It was there that most of Le Division De Fez had concentrated to prevent an Allied breakout towards Tangier. The Americans took the port on D+1, but could go no further.

I/16 and I/65th Luftland would be the next units arriving from Irfane airfield to the south, then III/7th Flieger, a slow but steady stream of German troops finally starting to arrive at Fez. They had made a most remarkable journey, coming all the way from Fuerteventura by sea, road, rail, and plane. Now they seemed like the 300 Spartans, few in number, but among the toughest troops in the Army as Kesselring knew them. The first of Kubler’s mountain regiment, the 98th Recon Battalion, would be another two or three days on the mountain roads getting north, but as the rest of these troops arrived, they would constitute a most capable force to defend Tangier, or to bar the way east through Fez to Algeria.

Another regiment would be air lifted from Agadair on the coast to Ifrane that day, leaving only one more regiment waiting for the transports to return at Agadair. Kesselring was going to pull off one of the most spectacular strategic withdraws of the war, a logistical miracle to get those troops to Fez, and the fate of this campaign, at least in French North Africa, would rest on their shoulders when they arrived.

The Americans were ashore in force, and the fall of Casablanca was inevitable now. When B Company, 105th Flak finally wandered down from the north to scout the road to Safi, General Martin lost his nerve. Had the Americans broke through up there? How many men were in this scouting detachment? He had watched Student withdraw, saw those Allied destroyers pounding his men day after day, and decided he would be much more comfortable in Marrakech than at Safi. His division began withdrawing that

same day.

So B Company would be the single unit to eventually answer the pleas of the beleaguered Safi raiding force, relieving that position on September 23rd. A grinning Sergeant rode in on a jeep, then scowled at the first US soldier he came upon. “You fellows were supposed to be at El Jadida up north five days ago!” Then he went back to that grin, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a cigar.

* * *

All these withdrawals frustrated Hitler to no end, prompting him to issue the strongest possible order that no further moves of this nature be made without his expressed permission. They also had one other effect, one intended by Allied planners from the very first moment they hatched this plan. Enraged, Hitler was going to pull units out of Russia and send them west.

6th and 7th Panzer Divisions were already rehabilitating, and they would soon get fresh equipment and orders to move to southern France immediately. The 7th, in particular, was part of an impending operation that augured big changes on the near horizon—Case Anton and Operation Lila. When the Führer was told it would take another week to do this, he exploded again.

“I have conquered all of France, Denmark, Norway, occupied Spain, taken Moscow, and even now my troops are pushing for the Volga, and you tell me we cannot move two panzer divisions? Get out! *Get out!*” He pointed with a stiff arm. “If those divisions are not at Toulon in 72 hours, I will have you shot!”

At that moment, in walked Himmler, his eyes narrowed and seeking to curry favor with the Führer while seeming to be a godsend.

“My Führer, I can send a full heavy armored brigade anywhere you need it in Spain in 24 hours.”

Hitler turned. “An armored brigade?”

Himmler opened his brief, and laid out the diagram chart detailing the order of battle for SS Brigade Charlemagne. “It is already in France, fully assembled, and I have arranged all the rolling stock needed. My Führer, it is only a matter of punching their tickets and sending them on their way.”

Astounded and pleased that Himmler could produce such a unit, seemingly from thin air, Hitler finally smiled. “You see?” he said, his eyes steely hard on all the other OKW officers at the map table. “The Army was stopped after Moscow, but not Steiner’s SS Korps. He will take Volgograd for me. Yes? And now look here, Himmler has out generated the lot of you!”

* * *

It was 3 Company, 67th Armored that finally bulled its way into the heart of Casablanca. They had 44 Shermans and supporting SPGs, backed up by a battalion of engineers as they fought their way past the cement works and old Shell Oil Depot, eventually reaching the Railway Sidings just west of the lighthouse on the coast. Most of the remaining French resistance was in the old city warrens, called Ancienne Medina. Patton had a mind to give them another sound naval bombardment, but he realized that these men might be turned into Allies if given better treatment. So on the morning of the 24th, he contacted the French by telephone, speaking directly to Admiral Michelier, who had holed up in the Palace de France near the main port.

“Admiral,” he said. “Your men have fought bravely, and done all that honor demanded. But the American Army is now ashore in force, and you are outnumbered by more than five to one. The United States has been your friend since the first Doughboys landed in France in the last war. This conflict is regrettable, and I see no reason for further bloodshed here. You and I have enough letters to write home as it stands. Lay down your arms and you, and all your men, will be given fair treatment. Any that wish to fight on for France may do so by joining us! Any who would wish to oppose us further will meet their fate and be interred.”

“Mon General,” said Michelier, “you have offered fair and generous terms. Let me consider what you have said, and contact my superiors.”

Patton pushed a little more. “Admiral, yours has been the hardest lot in this war, with foes made of friends, and a long road yet ahead before France is free of foreign occupation again. Your superiors are likely German Generals, but now hear this. I give you my word—I’m going to kick what’s left of the German Army out of French North Africa, liberate all of Morocco, and then I’m going to do the same for Algeria and Tunisia. You can either ride with me, or start writing your memoirs in a prison camp, and face trial by

your countrymen for betraying France when I liberate Paris. Now, what's it going to be?"

Admiral Michelier was a proud man, but he knew further resistance would serve nothing but a misplaced loyalty to Hitler and Nazi Germany. Patton's remark about his superiors being German Generals stung him. He had already learned of General Martin's withdrawal to Marrakech, and he knew the Fez Division would not hold in the north long either. Discretion was now the better part of valor, and he accepted Patton's terms at noon on the 24th of September, 1942—eleven weeks before the French had capitulated in the old history.

Upon hearing this, Patton invited the Admiral, and General Nogues to his headquarters, whereupon he produced a bottle of fine champagne. He would one day write: 'I also gave them a guard of honor—no use kicking a man when he's down.' Then he went to visit the Sultan of Morocco. Along the way he noted what excellent tank country Morocco offered, though it was frequently broken by small walled settlements that might make good infantry strongpoints.

Nothing a good 105mm can't handle, he thought. Yes, we'll do quite well here in Morocco, and I haven't even begun to show the French what the American Army can do.

The Americans finally had Casablanca, and Admiral Raeder would never see it again. They were ahead of schedule in that, but there was still a long way to go. The British action in Portugal and Spain was entirely new, and as yet undecided. Now it would come to the battle for Tangier, as Patton and Eisenhower turned their thoughts towards Gibraltar.

Chapter 24

The news of the fall of Casablanca was not a surprise when it came to Kesselring. He was already busy sorting out the troops arriving from the south at Fez, and seeing to the provision of a garrison for the Island outposts Germany still controlled. Gran Canaria had the Pioneer Battalion from Kubler's 98th Mountain Regiment, I/16 Battalion of the 22nd Luftland, which had been unable to get off by air and was then ordered to stay where it was. The 65th MG company from that same division and two light flak companies rounded out that garrison.

Fuerteventura had only the 47th MG Company at Puerto Rosario, a flak company at the southern port of Gran Tarahal, and a platoon guarding the shore battery the Germans had set up in the north to cover the Bocaina Strait. The last island, Lanzarote, was to be held by a the 22nd Pioneer Battalion from the Luftland Division. That was it, a force composed of about a single regiment to hold the prizes that it had taken two divisions to seize from the British. How long they would keep them remained to be seen.

The entire coast of Morocco south of Safi was still nominally German controlled but held only by a few rear area service battalions. All the air power had been shifting north, hopping first to the airfields around Marrakech, and then moving on to fields near Fez. All that was left of 327th Infantry Division was still strung out on the roads south of Fez, and there were still eight battalions, a mixed force of Kubler's regiment and the Luftland Division, much further south. They would have a 250 mile road march ahead of them, so it would be days before the withdrawal would be complete.

In the meantime, Kesselring continued to send elements of the 7th Flieger west on the rail line from Fez to the front north of Port Lyautey. From that point, the Division de Fez and Division de Mekenes held the line south and east, but the 7th Regiment of the American 9th Infantry Division had come up from Casablanca, cleared the road to Mekenes, and were threatening a move in that direction. Kesselring sent whatever he had in hand to Mekenes, 1/65 Luftland Battalion, three companies of the 22nd Recon Battalion from that same division, and the recon battalion arriving from 98th Mountain

Regiment. It had the best transport and was the only unit of that Regiment to get up north quickly.

The General's plan was a simple one. He wanted to cover and hold Fez for as long as possible, at least until those remaining troops arrived from the south. Then, if pressed hard, or should the French Divisions fold, he saw that the terrain still favored a good defense of Tangier. He would have to split his force, with one group falling back on Tangier and Ceuta. If he fell back in that direction, his lines would compress with each withdrawal, allowing him to hold while still extracting troops from the line to a port like Ceuta where they could be evacuated to Spain, or go by sea further east to Oran. The second group would then conduct a delaying withdrawal from Fez to Oran. He did not expect to receive any further troops from Germany, and this was his plan—assuming the Führer would permit such withdrawals.

That is doubtful, he thought. I will be lucky to keep my head for pulling the bulk of our forces out of the Canaries, but without them in hand, the Allies would sweep over Morocco to Oran unchallenged. Surely OKW doesn't think the French will hold them. So if I am ordered to fight for Morocco, Fez will have to be held. The only problem is that the Atlantic coast from the present Allied position near Rabat and Tangier is completely exposed. There are places there where they Allies could outflank the defense near the coast, which will also be hammered by their naval power.

To counter that, I will have to find some way of covering that coastline, and then use the Luftwaffe to attack their navy. It will be a nice little battle, and before it ends we will see how good these Americans really are. And if the British take Gibraltar behind me, that will be the end of it here in Morocco. I'll move to Algeria, whether the Führer permits it or not.

Now then... What help can I expect? I am told that Rommel has been ordered to send one of his panzer divisions to Tunis, and a number of ad-hoc units are being sent over from Italy. Koch will lead the best of them, good Luftwaffe men that have been assembling to create another Flieger Division. And his highness Hermann Goering is also detaching his personal division to assist us. They are calling the whole lot the 5th Panzer Army, and I am now to command the entire theater west of Tunis. I will need a good man to assist this effort—Nehring. Yes, he fought well with Guderian in France, and Rommel also speaks highly of him.

Yet all these detachments from the Afrika Korps will pretty much put an

end to Rommel's dream of ever driving east again. The only way he will ever see Alexandria is as a prisoner of war. It is still incredible to think the British have, beaten us there, and now they are at it again here! Hube is falling back from the Portuguese border and setting up his defense near Seville. This Montgomery hasn't an ounce of dash or daring in him, but he certainly has a way of wearing down the defense.

As for the newcomers, these Americans have yet to be tested. They pushed the French out of Casablanca, and I have no doubt that they will soon take Marrakech as well. Now, due to my timely redeployments, we will have enough here in Fez soon to put some metal in what remains of the French forces here. Yet I must seriously question how long the French will fight. What if they were to capitulate, or worse, go over to the enemy cause? I don't have the time or troops to go about disarming them, so the political situation is very shaky now. Both Spain and France are on quicksand. Plans are well laid to deal with this, and things are about to happen soon that will redefine this entire theater.

I am told General Dollmann is moving 7th Army units into Vichy controlled France—ostensibly to prepare for redeployment here in French North Africa, but Darlan will certainly see through that soon enough. Hitler has activated both 6th and 7th Panzer Divisions, and he has an eye on Toulon, with all the French naval assets there. I have asked for additional forces, and now I am promised the new 334th Infantry Division to help flesh out this makeshift 5th Panzer Army. The Italians have also pledged two divisions, though that will not please the French here at all.

Yes, what we have here is a very uneasy alliance. Franco is completely unreliable, and only a few of his divisions can be counted on. The rest will be a problem for Hube. The French and Italians hate one another, and here I am with the task of knocking heads together and making some sense of this entire mess. Rommel is already whining that I have siphoned off all the reinforcements that he was to receive, air units, ground replacement battalions, flak units, tanks. Whether he realizes it or not, we are not fighting on two fronts here, but for how long?

Our entire position in North Africa will depend on the Navy. If we can keep the British out of the Western Med, then supplies and materiel can continue to flow to Bizerte and Tunis, and to Oran and Algiers. Gibraltar is the key. If we lose that, then we'll have the Royal Navy here again, a

situation that will give Raeder a real nightmare. This is why we need what remains of the French Navy, but securing it may not be as easy as the Führer thinks. He has ordered 7th Panzer to Toulon, and the French have been told it is coming here. Little do they know that it is there to secure that port, and every ship it now holds. But where is the prize, the last mighty French battleship? *Normandie* was at Oran, and had now moved to Algiers. Getting our hands on that monster will be imperative, and plans are in the offing for that as well.

He smiled.

Yes, he thought. Things are about to get very interesting here. Now the war in the West has truly been reborn.

Negotiations with Darlan

On the Allied side of these deliberations, Eisenhower had attempted to arrange a secret meeting between Admiral Darlan and General Mark Clark in northern Spain to discuss the possibility of signing an armistice with France and ending hostilities between French and Allied forces. He was rebuffed in the beginning, but when Hitler ordered “Case Anton,” the German plan to send the 7th Army into Vichy controlled France, Darlan began to see things differently. Marshall Petain protested the buildup of German forces, but to no avail. It was clear that the Germans were planning to move substantial forces south, possibly all the way into French North Africa, and they wanted to take hold of any French military assets by the earlobes there before they slipped away.

So the meeting was finally set up, with Clark taking to an American submarine and slipping ashore with a team of US Army Rangers near the rocky headlands of the small Spanish port of Henday. A three mile hike through the mountains would take them to a small farm overlooking the port. Darlan made discrete arrangements to inspect the frontier defenses on the Spanish border, and submitted a false travel itinerary that would have him begin his tour at Lourds in Southern France. Instead he continued on the train to Henday, and so the town where Hitler once negotiated to gain Franco’s cooperation for Operation Felix would now become the site where Clark would attempt to wrest both Spain and France from the Führer’s hands.

Darlan was High Commissioner of the colonies, and nominal commander

in chief of all French North African forces. The ground for this meeting had been tilled for many months, so Darlan had been considering his options for a good long while. The two men met, shook hands cordially, and seated themselves at a small kitchen table in the quiet farmhouse. The edgy US Rangers stood watch, along with a small detachment of five security men that accompanied Darlan.

“Admiral,” said Clark, “This meeting has been a long time coming, and let us hope we can reach an accord here. I will restate the offer communicated to you earlier, and begin by saying that it has the approval of both the President of the United States, and Prime Minister Churchill. We are prepared to accept you as head of a new provisional government overseeing all French held territories in North Africa.”

“That is big of you, Mon General, because you see I presently hold that position.” Darlan smiled.

“Well Admiral... That could soon change. If, however, you would like to keep your present job, we would demand that you issue an immediate order for all French Forces in North Africa to join the Allies, or, at the very least, they must cease resistance and stand neutral while we go after the Germans.”

Darlan took a long breath. “You realize the Germans are moving troops to Tunisia even as we speak? They have withdrawn forces from southern Morocco and occupied Fez.”

“We’re well aware of that.”

“Well General, those troops are presently operating with our own troops. Do you realize the difficulty such an order would create?”

“Of course I do. In fact, we’re counting on it.”

“And if I found such an order too preposterous to contemplate?”

“Then your forces will continue to be treated as a hostile, and dealt with accordingly. We would prefer to avoid that, and as you undoubtedly know, Admiral Michelier and General’s Lascroux and Martin have already agreed with similar proposals put to them on the field of battle, and at Casablanca ,our General Patton faced down the entire German 327th Infantry Division.”

“A pity that division was withdrawn to Fez and Melkenes before the issue could be decided,” said Darlan. “I have no doubt that the untimely withdrawal of the Germans in that sector contributed greatly to the decision to yield Casablanca, and General Martin was too fond of his villa at Marrakech to see that city torn apart by fighting. But you must understand

that the Germans intend to stay in Morocco, and they are obviously very intent on securing Algeria and Tunisia as well. The outcome of all these events is very much in doubt. If I were to act prematurely..."

"If you were to act too late," Clark cut in, "then it might be difficult for us to guarantee that your position in North Africa could be upheld. I don't have to tell you that your General De Gaulle would be more than happy to take over there."

"He is not my General, and as far as I am concerned he will never command so much as a single platoon here."

"Then you need to act. There is no time for equivocation. I need to go back with a firm answer in hand."

Darlan thought a moment, knowing he had the authority to do what this man was asking him, even though Petain would most likely attempt to rescind any order he gave. Beyond that, there were mixed loyalties within his remaining divisions. Some regiments were nationalists, and would fight on, others cared little for the war that had finally come to their shores, and would willingly see any armistice as a means of extricating themselves from it.

"If I give this order," he explained, "you must realize that I cannot entirely guarantee that the troops in the field will obey."

"Well they certainly won't have any chance to make that choice if you don't give the order."

Darlan had been firmly in the camp of the collaborators, and was uncertain of the consequences for his past actions. "You would also guarantee that I would be granted personal immunity?"

"That was in the offer you received, and yes, we can guarantee that no charges would be brought against you personally, or any member of your staff. All we want is the speedy resolution of French participation as active combatants here. You are the one man who can do this, Admiral. Do not miss this opportunity."

Darlan nodded heavily. "Very well, General Clark, you may tell your superiors that I will issue such an order, for good or for ill, and expect the troops under my command to follow it. Whether they do so, with the Germans holding a bayonet to their backs, remains in doubt, but you will at least have my cooperation."

Clark got what he came for, and now he could make that 3 mile hike again and take to the rubber rafts for another ride on a submarine out to

Madeira. Darlan had acted as the opportunist he was, fearful that the outcome of the battle then underway would leave him in a fatally compromised position if he continued to lead his forces here in open arms against the Allies. He gave General Clark his word that his order would be transmitted no later than the 1st of October, three days hence.

But he would not live that long.

Unbeknownst to either of the two men that day, another player had entered the scene, with an agenda that neither man saw coming. It might have been Himmler, who was privy to the secret conversations Darlan had exchanged with Churchill—but it wasn't his doing that day. It might have been a young dissident student named Fernand Bonnier de La Chapelle, the man who would assassinate Darlan on Christmas eve of that very year in Fedorov's history, but it wasn't his to decide either.

No, the man in charge of these events would be the same who had first oiled the hinge of fate at Henday when Hitler last visited this sleepy coastal fishing port—a simple railway engineer named Juan Alfonso. He had stopped a leak in the roof of a train car, and that had been the balm that led to the unexpected accord when Hitler concluded his negotiations with Franco's Spain. This time he was at work, as usual, greasing a squeaky wheel on the train that would soon take Darlan back to his next appointment on the inspection tour.

The Admiral was aboard his private car, the engine had a good head of steam, the tracks were cleared, weather fine, and the green light was given for departure. But Juan Alfonso held the train up another ten minutes as he finished his job, and those last drops of oil were to lubricate the unfolding of these events in more ways than any of the Prime Movers could see. The train would head north to Bayonne, and at one point it would pass through a mountain tunnel. Had it left on schedule, it would have been in that tunnel, safely out of sight, when a pair of A-20 bombers came in that night, intending to cut that rail line to prevent the Germans from using it to move troops across the border. But the train was ten minutes late, for Juan Alfonso had greased the wheels of fate.

Part IX

Firebrand

“War is simple, direct, and ruthless. A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week”

— General George Patton

Chapter 25

If the Allies thought it would be easy to secure the French cooperation and conclude matters without further bloodshed, Juan Alfonso had put an end to their hopes that day. Admiral Darlan's Train was not in that safe underground railway tunnel, but instead on a bridge over a small river at Saint Jean de Luz. That bridge was struck by those two A-20s and blown to pieces by a direct hit that killed the Admiral in the ensuing train wreck. Whether his order would have ever been given, or heeded, was still debatable.

In Fedorov's history, the Allies had landed at Casablanca, Oran and Algiers simultaneously, thus striking at the key facilities and cities in both Morocco and Algeria. Days later they were already pushing into Tunisia. There were no German troops to speak of in either country, and little in the way of Luftwaffe support. Now, with Algeria uncontested and secure, German troops landing at Tunis and taking to the rail lines, heading west, the *Hindenburg* battlegroup arriving at Oran after its aborted sortie into the Atlantic, and nearly 450 Luftwaffe planes patrolling vast segments of the region, Darlan's order may very well have fallen on deaf ears.

After paying his respects to the Sultan of Morocco, promising to quickly liberate the remainder of his country, General Patton set out to do exactly that. He held Casablanca secure, now receiving supplies and equipment from the transport convoys, but near Port Lyautey the landing forces had been held up by the difficult river crossing a strong redoubt called the Kasbah, and the sudden arrival of unexpected German reinforcements.

Rather than push tired and disorganized troops against what looked like a strong defense, Patton decided to pull the regiments of the 1st Infantry Division out and replaced them with what had been Task Force Green, composed of 6th Armored Infantry Regiment. He wanted to collect all the 1st Division, and move them further east behind Harmon's Blackstone Force, which was driving on Meknes. Between that point and the coast near the Kasbah, the 9th Infantry held the line.

Having all these divisions in hand gave Patton a much more powerful force here than he had historically, because all the troops that had been

assigned to Oran and Algiers were now his to command in this single location. However, no thanks to Kesselring's startling withdrawal of the two German air mobile divisions, he would now be facing much tougher resistance, and there would be no question of further surrender on the part of the French.

The news of Darlan's death at the hands of those two A-20s did much to stiffen the resolve of Petain to fight on—that and the shadow of the German 7th Army, including the movement of 6th and 7th Panzer Divisions towards Toulon, along with 334th Infantry Division, bound for Algeria. The Americans had called those planes the Havoc, though in British hands it was given the more sedate name of the Boston. Yet a rose is a rose, and havoc was the order of the day. Now the French resistance would give the Germans just the time they needed to get reinforcements to North Africa.

So while he had been visiting the Sultan, dining with Governor of Dakar and the Grand Vizier, commiserating with French Generals in the old history, Patton was all business now. He was quickly reorganizing the US Army to begin the next phase of the operations aimed at Tangier. First, to secure his southern flank, he ordered 60th and 168th Infantry Regiments, and the 41st Armored Infantry Battalion south to secure Marrakech. The 39th RCT was moving inland to attempt to cut the road between that city and Fez, and also watch for any possible infiltration by German units coming up to Fez from the south.

"Alright," said Patton as he convened a staff meeting. "We've kindled the torch here, but the flame is guttering, and we've a long way to go. It's high time we turn his thing into a real firebrand, and then stick it right up the enemy's behind! We're going to take that damn Kasbah with Robinette's armored infantry and a liberal dose of good naval gunfire support. I was aboard the *Augusta* when the 9th came in at Fedala, and those boys know how to dish it out. Blew my personal launch right off the deck! Now then... 9th Infantry will push hard for this town here." He fingered Sidi Slimane on the map. "That's holding them by the nose. Then I'll sweep around to the right, run Harmon and Allen's troops into Mekenes, and kick 'em in the ass."

It was going to be the first coordinated American attack of the war on a corps level, three full divisions, with a supporting armored task force, against two French and two German divisions. It began on the coast near the strong French fortress known as the Kasbah. It had resisted the probing infantry

attacks of 1st Infantry for three days, and the French had held the American advance up at the winding river that looped in a sharp hairpin anchored at Port Lyautey. Then that unit was pulled out, and Robinette's 6th Armored Infantry rattled up in halftracks.

After giving the enemy one last chance to surrender, which was met with machinegun fire that took down an American officer under a white flag, the battleship *Massachusetts* open fire and began pounding the thick stone walls with a fearful din. When that fire lifted, 2nd Battalion 6th Armored Infantry made their attack, the men dismounted and fixed bayonets, the halftracks backing them up with heavy suppressive MG fire. They broke the defense of 2nd Moroccan Infantry, stormed the Kasbah and pushed on over the river to a beach that should have been taken on D-Day, but one that was missed due to a mix-up in the landings.

The Americans already had the airfield, where P-40s that had been crowded onto the decks of the light carrier *Chenango* had flown in the previous evening to support the attack. Half a mile east, the tanks of 1/13th Armored Battalion had taken the bridge over the river. With the defense of the 1st Moroccan Regiment cracking, 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 7th Flieger Division moved quickly forward to bolster the line, the veteran troops crouching low as they sprinted forward. Soon they were in position, with MG 42s sited to rake the open ground if the enemy persisted. Two batteries of artillery sent up by rail from the 22nd Air Landing Division now opened fire on the leading American positions, which sent the inexperienced GIs diving for any cover they could find in the barren ground.

Colonel Robinette saw what was happening, and looked for a radio to get fire support from the navy. It would be quick in coming, as the cruiser *Tuscaloosa*, and the battleship *Texas* were hovering off shore, ready to weigh in. Meanwhile, the 9th Infantry Division put heavy pressure all along the line from the port, along the river, to the inland town of El Khemist on the road to Meknes. There it took the intervention of the German 327th Recon Battalion, finding A-Company of the American 756th Tank Battalion moving through a hole in the disorganized French defense.

The Germans had seven SdKfz 234s and another eight lighter 221s, but they were enough to stop and push the US Light tanks back when supported by a company of motorcycle infantry. On the main road itself, the 327th Pioneer Battalion was already digging in behind the French positions, the

engineers building a hasty defensive position, where they now crouched with Panzerfausts and MG-42s. They were the first two battalions of that division to arrive, but the 595th Regiment was only about 20 kilometers south of Mekenès and tramping north into the grey dawn. Behind them would come the 596th, expecting to reach the city before noon.

It would be a kind of scissors, paper, rock affair. The hard points of the German defense near the coast would be papered by the greater mass of the US force, and the French were not able to hold the gaps between these strongpoints. If the Germans organized a counterattack, those scissors would be smashed by the rock of superb naval gunfire from the battleships *Texas* and *New York*, and cruisers *Augusta*, *Philadelphia* and *Tuscaloosa*. The Germans called Fez for air support to paper over those naval units, but in came the scissors of the American air defense, with P-40's off the airfield at Port Lyautey, Wildcats off the decks of the carrier *Ranger*, and P-38s from airfields near Casablanca.

The Americans could not match the German Bf-109s, but they outnumbered them, and the new P-38 gave them very good long range coverage, and excellent loiter time. The Germans were seeing this plane for the first time, a combination of speed, agility, range and hitting power that would make it the excellent fighter they would come to call *der Gabelschwanz-Teufel*, "the fork-tailed devil."

Yet the Germans learned quickly, and their veteran pilots soon discovered the new enemy plane did not roll very fast, making it vulnerable in a dogfight with their excellent Bf-109s. When matched against the better German pilots, the P-38s often came out on the losing end, but combined with the other American aircraft swirling about the skies, the Allies had enough to control the vital airspace over the coast. Now the maxim that the British had learned in the Western Desert was proven here—where Allied fighters could control the skies, the *Stuka* was dead in any role it attempted to perform, be it close support or interdiction.

Yet Kesselring was very cool on defense, and he knew he had sufficient force in hand to delay this attack until he could position more troops to the north. He sent the remainder of Student's 7th Flieger Division up the rail line from Mekenès to organize a defense in depth. Then he fed those regiments of the 337th Division, now arriving from Casablanca, and used them to set up a defense against the drive by General Harmon on the main road, and the

enfilading attack by Allen's 1st Infantry Division further south. General Kubler's 98th Mountain Regiment, finally arriving after two weeks hard march, would anchor the line well to the south, and as for the 22nd Luftland Division, he mustered these Regiments at the airfields around Fez, collecting all the Ju-52s he could find.

The British Landings at Cadiz

The British 6th Armored Division had pushed through Villa Real to link up with the landing of the 36th Brigade Group south of Huelva. Hube's 16th Panzer was hard pressed when the 3rd Infantry Division came up to the north, flanking their defensive screen west of Seville. That was to be the first real battle in the north. The British had little trouble pushing across the border into Spain, as Franco's troops preferred to withdraw rather than get into any hard defensive positions there. As Montgomery was keenly focused in driving south towards Gibraltar through Seville, the Spanish divisions were content to stay well north of that action, screening the frontier where the Portuguese were equally content to sit on their side of the border, unengaged.

Yet Monty would face a tough and hardening defense around Seville. Well north, his 43rd Wessex Division was facing off against the German 327th Infantry, and on the 28th of September, the 15th Infantry Division arrived after a long rail journey through Valencia and Cordoba. They were just in time to begin relieving Hube's screening forces, and the General intended to pull back his 16th Panzers, regroup, and use them to counterattack.

South of Seville, there was only one good road from the beachhead near Huelva, and it was now being watched by elements of Himmler's little surprise gift to Hitler, the SS Charlemagne Brigade. Troops landing on the beaches south of Huelva found they could not flank this defense due to heavy marshland that extended well inland between Seville and Cadiz on the coast further south. That port would now become the apple of Montgomery's eye, and he contemplated sending in another seaborne assault.

"Look here," he said. "We've got Spitfires and Hurricanes on every airfield worth the name in Portugal now, and I daresay we'll have the edge over the Luftwaffe—enough to cover a landing at Cadiz. That port can support my push on Gibraltar easily enough, but we've only the 27th Brigade

Group left for infantry, and they're at Lagos in Portugal."

"What about the Commandos, sir? We've had a good look at the Canaries, and Jerry had pulled out, lock, stock and barrel. They've only left a small garrison there, and Alexander reports he has sufficient force to go on the offensive when the shipping arrives. That leaves all those Commando Battalions, and Johnny Frost's 1st Parachute Regiment as well. Might we use them at Cadiz?"

That idea sounded very appealing to Montgomery, and he set about pulling the levers to get his hands on those troops immediately. The Commandos could move in under cover of darkness, seize the moles and jetties at both Cadiz and the smaller port of Rota to the north. Then they could be strongly reinforced with the 29th Brigade Group embarking from Lagos.

That was the plan for the 29th of September, and Number 2 Commando had little trouble, storming the quays of Cadiz and pushing out a small, ill equipped German service battalion. Yet this battle would also become something considerably more than the lightning swift raid in Monty's mind.

Cadiz itself stood on a narrow spit of land extending up from the south near the town of San Fernando, and framing a wide bay. It was a perfect breakwater, and the landward side to the east, from San Fernando in the south to Puerto Real further north was backed by marshland broken by a web of small water canals. It was no place for armor, or any mechanized force, so the attack would have to be all infantry here. Further north, the bay stretched up past Santa Maria to the small port of Rita, where the Germans had occupied the airfield. Whether or not the British had air superiority, planes off that field would be a constant threat, and Admiral Tovey deemed it too risky to commit his valuable battleships in an attempt to close that field with naval gunfire. It would have to be work for the destroyers.

The defense of the bay had not been adequately determined, though the easy landing made by Number 2 Commando got things off on the right foot. Now, however, they would either have to fight their way down that narrow spit of land, or take to their assault boats again and attempt to cross the bay. The swampy ground and salt pans there precluded that, and so the only option was to take the road south to San Fernando. They would be quickly reinforced by 10 and 12 Commandos, bringing their numbers to regimental strength by mid day.

Further north, 4 and 9 Commandos would land at Rota, seize that German airfield, and then push through the light woodland on much better ground. Their primary objective would be to reach the larger town of Jerez, about 20 kilometers east of Rota. That city sat like the hub of a wheel, with roads extending out in all directions. If the enemy had mobile troops to reinforce this sector, that is where they would have to come.

What the British did not know was that the Germans had already sent reinforcements to the area. The Pioneer Battalion of SS Charlemagne had arrived at Santa Maria between Cadiz and Rota, and Rota itself was already garrisoned by II/58th Battalion of that same brigade. These were Vichy French troops, but the best of the lot, and their ranks were well seeded with Veteran SS troops and officers. The Commandos were going to have more on their hands than they bargained for. Some 60 kilometers north on the road to Seville, I/58th Motorized Infantry could also take to their vehicles and get south to the Cadiz area in just a few hours time.

Another thing that Monty had not taken into account was that Cadiz was only some 55 miles from Gibraltar as the crow flies, and the Germans would certainly react strongly to any attempt to take it. They would soon concentrate the bulk of their air power there, and move any available troops south from Seville to secure that flank.

This would be the tale of two cities that would decide the outcome of the campaign in Spain. To get to Gibraltar, Montgomery needed Cadiz and Seville, and that was where the fire of war was now, burning hotter with each passing hour.

Chapter 26

Three British Commando units had been sent to take Rota. Number 4 and 9 Commandos landed north of the town, seizing a small lighthouse and breakwater and then pushing into the light woods. Number 4 Commando was late, and it came under enemy air attack soon after dawn. *Stukas* on the airfield north of Jerez were able to make runs from lower elevation before the Allied fighter cover thickened, and they caught the units approaching the shore, savaging it and inflicting heavy casualties. The men come in through the tall sea spray thrown up by the bombs, but many were flayed by shrapnel, and dead in the water before they ever reached the beach.

By 09:00 on the 29th, Number 9 Commando was approaching Rota from the north and came under heavy MG fire. 4 Commando was also pinned down as they approached the small town of Barameda, as another German battalion had come down to bolster that flank.

Only at Cadiz itself was any real progress made. Number 2 Commando chased out the German service troops, secured the docks and quays, but could not push into Puerto Real. The British therefore decided to try and flank the position through the hamlet of Chiclana de la Frontera south of the marshy salt pans, and met little opposition. Yet it was soon clear that this force could not push further inland without substantial support, and that would have to wait for the 29th Brigade Group of 78th Infantry, assembling at Lagos and planning to move by sea that night.

When they landed at Cadiz under cover of darkness and heavy cloud cover, it dramatically changed the calculus of the entire battle in Spain. Thus far, only the motorized infantry regiment of SS Charlemagne had reacted to what appeared to be a strong raid on Rota and Cadiz. Now, with reports of British regulars on the road south of Cadiz and heading for Gibraltar, Hube was compelled to detach the Panzergrenadier regiment of SS Charlemagne, and hasten it south. To do so, he had to shuffle his entire defense of Seville, and under heavy pressure from the British 6th Armored Division backed by 3rd Infantry. He fed in arriving battalions of the 15th Infantry, using them to cover the withdrawal of his own 16th Panzer Division.

Now the entire SS Charlemagne Brigade was rushing south, mostly by

road, but II Sturm Battalion managed to find enough rolling stock outside Seville to go by rail. When it arrived at Algeciras near Gibraltar that evening, it was practically the only German unit screening the Rock.

To make matters worse, the British had diverted yet another armored division that had been destined to go to 8th Army in Alexandria. There O'Connor was to receive both the 8th and 10th Armored Divisions, but he only got the 8th. Monty got the 10th, and he landed it at Lisbon, moving it quickly by rail across the frontier into Spain. That heavy reinforcement, along with the 43rd Wessex already on the line, was going to force the steady withdrawal of 327th Infantry Division. In just one day after committing to the raid on Cadiz, the entire situation in Spain had changed, and now Gibraltar was under threat of imminent attack.

That night Royal Marines would make another daring landing at the small fishing port of Barbate, near Frontera on the main road to Gibraltar. They seized that town, and occupied hill 1024 overlooking that road, which now extended southeast through a lowland valley and then into hills leading to Tarifa on the southernmost tip of Spain. From there it would climb beneath the looming highland east of Algeciras, just a few miles to the Rock.

Hube got on the phone to Kesselring, asking him if there was anything he had in the way of air mobile forces that could be sent to Gibraltar.

"What happened to your panzer division?"

"It's been in a tough fight for days. We had 109 tanks when we entered Spain. Now I have 57 as of this morning. I'm relieving it with 15th Infantry to build up a mobile reserve. Can you send anything?"

"I have two regiments of the 22nd on the airfields at Fez," said Kesselring.

"Then send one, at the very least."

"That will be a very hazardous affair. The Allies have fighters up every day now, thick as flees on a camel's back."

"Try in any case, and if they cannot get through, then you must get something to Tangier, Ceuta or any other port so they can go by sea. The Führer demands that Gibraltar be held at all costs!"

Kesselring tried, but while Ramcke's Headquarters unit of the 16 Regiment got through, none of the transports carrying its troops would ever land at Gibraltar. They were pounced on by P-38s, and even though the German Bf-109s exacted a heavy toll, the resulting air battle forced most of

the Ju-52s to abort and return to Fez. Those that persisted ran into the new British Seafires over the Straits of Gibraltar off the carrier *Victorious*, and many went into the sea. The remainder looked for any safe airfield in Morocco to go to ground.

Ramcke got off his JU-52, feeling lucky to be alive when he saw the bullet holes in the tail where a fighter had taken a nip out of them. He stood there on the airfield, beneath the imposing stark cliffs of the Rock, waiting for an hour. At noon he took a car into the city, looking for the local commandant of the garrison, a Colonel Jurgen.

“Greeting’s General,” said Jurgen. “Just in time to stop the British!”

“Oh?” said Ramcke, “Sorry to say that none of my men got through. I suppose I can help a little with my service pistol, but first, I think I will need a stiff drink.”

When Kesselring got the news he swore, throwing a briefcase against the wall of his headquarters in Fez. That was a waste of time and resources. The planes and men that made it back to Fez would now have to regroup, repair, and refuel—either that or the troops would have to find a way to go by road or rail as Hube had suggested. The rail line through Meknes to Tangier was still open, but Kesselring saw that route as also subject to heavy Allied air attack. He could see that anything he sent that way would most likely have to de-train and move overland about 50 kilometers to the smaller port of Ceuta. Tangier was being watched by enemy submarines hovering off the harbor, and Raeder had no destroyers to go after them. That port was effectively useless to us, he knew. We hold it simply to deny it to the enemy, who would soon use it as a place to spring board towards Gibraltar.

Yet anything I sent by that route will likely be too late to remedy the situation in southern Spain. And if I do send anything, it will likely find itself trapped up there, and forced to withdraw on Ceuta to have any chance of escape. As long as we hold the straits of Gibraltar, at least that port is still operational, but that could change soon. Raeder will not commit *Hindenburg* to the defense of those straits, and so everything relies on the defense provided by six U-boats, the shore batteries, and minefields. Tangier is outside that wall of defense, Ceuta well inside it.

The telephone rang, interrupting his thoughts. It was Kurt Student calling from his position on the coast north of Port Lyautey.

“The French are useless!” he complained. “My battalions are in good

defensive positions, but the French collapse in the gaps between them, and if my men stand, they'll be enveloped. I've been conducting a stubborn withdrawal north, but unless I get some reliable support out here, I cannot guarantee you anything. The Americans are pushing hard up the coast road, and it is covered by their damnable naval gunfire. Where are the *Stukas*?"

"They can't get through," said Kesselring. "We started with 250 Bf-109s, and have already lost 25% of them.

Then reports came in from Kubler, on the road south of Fez. He had been holding the extreme flank of the line of defense put up by the 337th Infantry Division, stretching from Mekenes on south. Primarily held by German troops, that line had held off the American 1st Infantry Division, but now, Kubler reported more enemy units on the road to his south. They had reached the road junction at the town of Ainleuh, where the main road ran northeast through Irfane to Fez, and a secondary road ran north to Kubler's position and eventually Mekenes.

"These troops have to be coming up from Marrakech," said Kubler on the radio. They are only half a day's march from the airfield at Irfane. I'll have to pull out now to have any chance of getting Back to cover Fez. Either that, or you must use those last battalions of the 22nd Luftland Division. They were behind us as we came north, and must have reached Irfane by now."

"Yes," said Kesselring. "That is where I've been mustering every JU-52 I could get my hands on. But moving them by air may be out of the question now. Look Kubler, we must now see this situation as nothing more than a delaying action. The French are useless, just as you say. Half their troops want nothing to do with this fight, and the half that remain aren't enough to do anything worth mentioning. On top of that, Hube is asking me to send troops to Gibraltar! It is clear that we will not be able to hold this front long, and so we will have to begin a fighting withdrawal. Play for time. Your division, and the 22nd are the only effective troops in French North Africa between here and Tunisia!"

"Nothing has been sent from Germany?"

"Oh, we are promised the 334th Division, green troops for the most part. Rommel has two good divisions on the way, but they will not get here in time to save Morocco. Algeria is another matter. A number of small units are forming up in Tunis, and some are already on the rail lines heading west. Koch is there."

“You can rely on him,” said Student. “Those were troops I was culling to build my next Flieger Division, a good brigade.”

“I’m sending them to Oran, and Raeder has seen fit to move the *Hindenburg* there. It arrived this morning, along with those two aircraft carriers and the *Kaiser Wilhelm*. That may keep the French Oran Division in line for a while, but Koch should also be there tonight... which is where we will be headed soon in my judgment. Morocco is not defensible with Gibraltar under pressure like this. We must either put all our units into the defense of Gibraltar, and likely lose them here, or play for time. If I get everything I was promised, I can delay the Allied advance on Tunisia for months. So this is the plan. If I get word that Hube cannot stop this attack on Gibraltar, then we are finished here in Morocco. Get your men back to the rail line and secure rolling stock now. I’ll keep the line open through Meknes to Fez, and we will fall back on Oran. The Führer will not want to hear anything about withdrawals, and if he does, it will likely be my head on a platter, but we must do what we must do. See to it.”

That night, four Marsch Battalions pulled into Algiers, troops that had been intended as replacement battalions for Rommel. Behind them on the road, was another motorized battalion designated KG Hauer. Major General Mast, in command of the Division de Algiers, was headquartered outside the city, at a town called Blida on the rail line. He had been Chief of Staff of the French 10th Army Corps at the outbreak of the war before moving to this post. Yet he had long been suspected of disloyalty to the Vichy regime, and was even arrested at one point, before a close personal friend who was also the Japanese Military Attaché to Vichy France obtained his release. So the Germans were somewhat edgy as to his reliability, and the disposition of his division in that vital city.

Algiers was important for its harbor, two good airfields, and close proximity to Toulon relative to Oran or Gibraltar. It was also the center of Vichy French administration for all their North African colonies and protectorates. If it were to fall, all German operations to the west would be cut off. Still suspecting General Mast was in league with other officers like Giraud who were deemed ‘collaborators’ with the Allies, Kesselring had been ordered to take any and all necessary measures to secure that city and port.

General Mast had been told the Germans would be coming to Algiers, a brief stop before continuing west towards Morocco, but that was a lie.

Kesselring intended them to take control of the city and harbor, even though they would be badly outnumbered if it came to hostilities. Mast had over 7500 men under arms in and around Algiers, to no more than 1800 German troops arriving in those battalions.

There was one other reason why the Germans were very nervous about this situation, and it was moored to the long stone breakwater out in the bay, the pride of the French Fleet, the battleship *Normandie*. Admiral Laborde was commanding that ship, with a small flotilla of destroyers out in the bay. His dislike of Darlan was well known. In fact, Marshall Petain had played him off against Darlan, and at times whispered that he might replace him. Laborde was also angry at Admiral Raeder, seeing his use of French naval resources as nothing more than a disaster for the navy. In Fedorov's history, it would be Laborde who would give the order to scuttle the French Fleet at Toulon, and Hitler had received a message from Ivan Volkov warning him of this, and telling him to watch that man closely. So he, too, was darkly suspected of collusion with the Allies, and when a man you suspect of possible treason is commanding one of the most powerful battleships in the world, you take special precautions.

That night, three U-boats were lurking in the silent darkness beneath the sea off Algiers, and they were each carrying a platoon of the elite Brandenburg Commandos. Their mission, should it be determined that Laborde and Mast were unreliable, was to seize control of the *Normandie* on a signal that would be transmitted later.

General Mast would be receiving General Hasso-Eccard Freiherr von Manteuffel, the commander of those four Marsch battalions, for dinner at his headquarters. Manteuffel had been told those battalions were to be the nucleus of a new division that would take over at Algiers, but his first order of business would be to size up General Mast and make the decision as to whether or not that fateful signal would be given to the Brandenburgers.

It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter 27

“A very good meal,” said Manteuffel as he sopped up the last of the sauce that had been ladled over a very fine cut of lamb. “When I was told I would be assigned to 5th Panzer Army, I did not expect the fare would be quite so opulent.”

General Mast nodded with a smile. “I cannot say we dine this way every day, Mon General, Yet for a special guest, a little civility is warranted. It reminds me of France, and the life we had... before the war.”

Manteuffel could not help but notice the certain inflexion in the other man’s voice. It wasn’t a longing for the better times of the past. There was a certain recrimination in his tone, well masked, but there. It was just the sort of thing the General was there to look for. He had been briefed on this man, and told his host had long been suspected of collaboration with the Allies. Now he was here to ascertain his reliability.

“Well General,” he said. “You and your troops have not had a bad posting here in Algeria. I daresay it is much preferred to the duty I had in Russia. Now, however, the war is coming in your direction. Can you say your men are ready to deal with that?”

“My men will always be ready to defend France,” said Mast, and Manteuffel noted that there was wide latitude in that careful statement. “But tell me,” Mast said quickly. “This 5th Panzer Army—it is coming from Germany?”

“From Rommel, for the most part. I am forming a division here as units arrive at Tunis, but the guts of the army will be the panzer divisions Rommel sends us. There will be more troops arriving very soon.”

“I see... Then Rommel can afford to detach these divisions in his present position? It was my understanding that he has been rather hard pressed since the battle on the Gazala line.”

“He still holds the line at Mersa Brega, and I am told that is very good ground for defense.”

“Ah... Then he is no longer planning another move east. Lord knows we sent him more than enough trucks to get him to Alexandria.”

“And for that we are very appreciative,” said Manteuffel. “But you and I

both know that Rommel will never get to Alexandria. General Mast, let me be clear about what is now happening. As you may well know, the British have landed in Spain and the Americans already have Casablanca. It is a pity that all our good troops out west were in Southern Morocco and the Canary Islands when this invasion began, but they have already been withdrawn north—three divisions under General Kesselring. In fact, My division will be subordinate to his headquarters with 1st Fallschirm-Armee North Afrika. General von Arnim will command 5th Panzer Armee with the troops Rommel sends him, and the whole lot will be renamed Armee Group Afrika. Now then, that fight in Morocco will soon be coming here, and both Oran and Algiers will likely become principle objectives of the enemy. You and your men will soon be put to the test.”

“Then you are taking your men west to Oran tomorrow?”

“Those are my orders.” Manteuffel lied.

“Well then rest assured, Algiers will be kept secure for France in your absence. Have you noticed our other distinguished guest out in the harbor? I extended an invitation to Admiral Laborde to join us this evening, but he was otherwise engaged. Yet with the *Normandie* sitting out there, I do not think the Allies will be coming here by sea—and not while you still hold Gibraltar. Have no fear, I will meet with the Admiral tomorrow and we will determine how best to proceed. In the meantime, I do hope you enjoy your battle in Morocco. I never liked the place. Too many flies, even this late in the year. Yes... big grey flies....”

Manteuffel heard more in that than he wished. He was a very astute man, and could see through a brick wall if he sat before it long enough. One thing he clearly saw here was that this General Mast had no love of the German Army. He had no doubt that those big grey flies were the Luftwaffe troops holding the line in Morocco. And what might this man be cooking up with Admiral Laborde tomorrow, he thought?

What he would do next would be very risky. He had four battalions of infantry in the city, all down near the harbor. In the morning, when his men failed to board the trains again for their supposed journey west, this General Mast will not like that news over his breakfast. But the *Normandie* is the key. Its guns could pound my troops to dust if the French had the backbone to fire on this city. The next train in from Tunis will have a thousand navy men, all that Admiral Raeder could send us from Germany and Southern France. I am

told Vice Admiral Hellmuth Heye is getting a big promotion and a seat in the Kapitan's Chair of the *Normandie*, and of course, that ship will have to be renamed.

But all of this awaits my decision here, and my order to take that ship. That will be work for the Brandenburgers. A full company is seeded in those Marsch Battalions near the harbor—excellent troops under Friedrich von Konen. The rest come on the U-boats, and if we cannot take that ship, they have orders to sink it rather than see it break out into the Med.

An aide from his headquarters staff came in precisely at 11:00pm, as ordered, whispering something in his ear. Manteuffel looked at his watch, noting the time and realizing that the moon would be down in precisely sixteen minutes. “Well General Mast,” he said. If you will excuse me, I have yet another appointment this evening, and it will be a very long day tomorrow. I thank you for your hospitality, and I hope we can repay your courtesy in the days ahead.”

Mast smiled, not knowing that Manteuffel had whispered a pre-arranged phrase to the aid, who departed with a salute, only to return a moment later with three armed men.

“Your escort?” said Mast, raising an eyebrow. “I can assure you that the area is completely secure.”

“No, Mon General, this is *your* escort. If you will be so kind enough to remain here, I must be off to make certain this area is indeed secure.” Manteuffel pulled on his gloves, smiled and turned to leave. He stopped, turning briefly. “My adjutant will ask you to order your men to stand down here. If they do not, then hostilities will commence immediately.”

“What is the meaning of this? Hostilities? What do you intend here? This is outrageous! I will do no such thing!”

“I was afraid that would be your answer.” Manteuffel strode out, his footsteps hard and fast in the outer hall.

Even as he did so, his aides had already transmitted the code name “Amsel,” or “Blackbird” to all the four Marsch Battalion commanders. They were already setting up defensive positions around the harbor, while other units were fanning out, intending to surprise as many unwary French units as possible and disarm them before they could be formed into any force for real resistance. They were moving to secure the rail yards and station at the harbor, where feeder lines extended onto all the docks and quays. Others

burst into the Provisional Government offices on Rude d' Isly, while a full company was dispatched to seize control of Fort L'empereur on a low hill overlooking the city, while another moved to surprise the barracks at Caserne d' Orleans.

The Brandenburgers were already on the move, with Konen dispatching one platoon to the long cement breakwater. The appointment Manteuffel had alluded to with General Mast was a visit he had planned to the *Normandie*, to meet briefly with Admiral Laborde, ostensibly to deliver a personal letter from Admiral Raeder. Of course, he would never make that appointment, for his aim was to quickly reach KGs Witzig and Hauer only now arriving by truck outside the city. That unit would be tasked with securing roads from Blida to Algiers, and the headquarters units of General Mast. In his place, Konen would arrive with an escort, dressed out in a Wehrmacht General's uniform, and posing as Manteuffel himself. His aim was to be escorted deep into the heart of the battleship, and get as many of his men on the deck of that behemoth as possible.

At the same time, those three u-boats had surfaced to disgorge their platoons of commandos, all in black uniforms and slipping into the sea on dark inflatable rubber boats. They paddled silently through the relatively still waters, glad that the tides were quiet. Behind them was one other very special unit. A group of Kriegsmarine crewmen that had been pulled off the *Hindenburg* when it was at Gibraltar, and flown out by seaplane to rendezvous with a fourth U-boat in the Med. They were gunners, all highly trained in the operations of heavy naval armament, and their leader was none other than Axel Faust, the strong arm of Anton turret on the *Hindenburg*. They would follow the Brandenburgers in, waiting just off the harbor until a lantern signal ordered them to proceed.

The commandos slipped up to the wide armored flanks of the *Normandie*, taking to any netting or ladder they could find, where several small boats had been moored along the belly of the beast. Their movement was so stealthy, that it was as if the shadow of night had rolled gently in on the evening tide, lapping against the steel of the battleship. Up they went, the silence thick as the dark.

It was not long before they had reached the main weather deck, where it was knife work at first, until one wary sentry shouted the alarm. Soon after, the snap of pistol fire cut through the night, and a burst of submachine gun

fire interrupted the meeting in Admiral Laborde's stateroom. There, Konen and two supposed staffers had, indeed, produced a letter from Admiral Raeder, and Laborde had been reading it, with growing alarm as he scanned the lines.

"Admiral, it is with great regret that I must now convey to you the news that you are herewith relieved of your command aboard the Normandie, which will shortly be taken as a prize of war..."

Laborde heard the machinegun, men shouting and running on the decks below, a bell ringing, and he instinctively reached for his pistol, only to see he was already covered by three others. Colonel Konen reached quietly for the weapon, removing it, and then saluted. He then ran to the nearest port hole, eager to see what was happening outside in the harbor.

The next ten minutes would be crucial, as there was still a destroyer in the harbor, well within the protected area encompassed by the Jetee du Nord and the large breakwater where the *Normandie* was moored. Furthermore, there was a battery on the Jetee du Nord that could turn and cover the moles and quays. There had been three destroyers earlier that day, but two had been lured out to sea hours earlier by a false distress call from a steamer, where they were now attempting to take on what looked to be tired and wet crewmen, all well infiltrated with Brandenburgers. It was hoped that the third destroyer would have also responded, but it still remained in the harbor, and it could be a problem.

The key was getting those naval gunners and Axel Faust aboard the *Normandie* as quickly as possible, and the Brandenburgers had made the forward main gun turret a primary objective, racing down the deck past B turret to the massive armored hulk of A turret beyond. Faust's men arrived, scrambling up netting thrown down by the commandos. They had already seized the turret compartment, sending men down into the bowels of the magazine itself, and herding any French sailors they found before them. At one point, the French got onto a light flak gun three decks up, and began turning it about, trying to depress the gun to fire on the lower deck and turret. The Brandenburgers saw them, and sprayed the exposed gun mount with automatic weapons fire.

Axel Faust and his men were soon up and rushing to the open side hatch of the massive turret. Once inside, they had command of an armored fortress, with four 15-inch guns armed and pointed directly at that destroyer where it

was berthed near the railroad station quay. Faust felt right at home, looking the equipment over, and instinctively knowing what he would have to do here. It was just another A turret, only the had twice as many guns to load. A message would be sent by the commandos telling that destroyer Captain that his ship would be blown to pieces the first sign of steam or any hostile action with its deck guns. To underline the point, Faust soon had the turret rotated and guns trained on the destroyer, their barrels lowering with a hydraulic growl.

By this time, the full company was aboard ship, disarming the small contingent of French Marines, and ordering any crew they encountered up onto the main deck. They were fortunate to find that a good percentage of the ship's compliment had been ashore that night.

So it was that the element of surprise, and the training, skill and determination of the Brandenburgers, would take the pride of the French Fleet in its mailed fist of steel that night. It was essential that men go down to prevent the sea-cocks from being opened, and forestall any attempt to scuttle the ship. At that very same moment, in the Harbor of Toulon to the northeast, the units of 7th Panzer Division which had been deployed all over the harbor area to supposedly be loaded for transport to Oran, were instead seizing the French Naval units there.

Ironically, it was Admiral Jean de Laborde who was at Toulon in the old history, and it was he who gave the final order that the French fleet should be scuttled. He had sailed to Algiers aboard the *Normandie* to meet with General Mast and plan how they might deliver Algiers to the Allies at an appropriate time. At that moment, with the war front far to the west in Morocco, and no hope of any Allied intervention until those battle lines had swept into Algeria, Neither General Mast, nor Laborde, had been in a position to take any decisive action. Their intention had been to use the time that remained to ascertain which units in French North Africa they might turn at an appropriate time, and these plans were only in the early stages of development before they were pre-empted by Manteuffel, Konen's Brandenburgers, and the daring German plan.

Come sunrise on the 29th of September, Germany would have a new super battleship, and Manteuffel would be in control of most of Algiers Harbor, including the graving docks, moles, petroleum storage depot, machine shops, port offices, and the seaplane base in the southwest quadrant.

There were several French units well outside the city that had not been accounted for, some of them more determined Senegalese Regiments. They rallied when the shock of what was happening finally sunk in, and began forming up their battalions to push into the city with the aim of re-taking the harbor. But more German troops would soon arrive by rail, the leading edge of some really tough fighting men in the Hermann Goring Division. Behind it, Fischer's 10th Panzer Division had moved to disarm the French Division at Constantine, and the French defenders of Tunis were meeting more unwelcome guests that night as well. A stream of transport aircraft were landing at the airfields, bearing the leading elements of the 334th Infantry Division. One Battalion of the 10th Panzer Regiment was also just outside the city, having been dropped off there for just this purpose. Its armor proved very persuasive. By dawn, ships would arrive with the Italian Superga Division, a Bersaglieri Regiment, and more German units, including the first company of the 501st Schwere Panzer Battalion.

That day, peremptory fighting would continue in and around Algiers, but it was a fire that the rapidly arriving Herman Goring Division would quickly put down. Further west in Oran, KG Koch had four more veteran Falschirmjaeger battalions to seize that vital harbor, only this time the battleship out in the bay was the *Hindenburg*. It had been necessary to take out the shore batteries at Ain el Turk and others on the eastern coast, but the 16-inch guns of *Hindenburg* made short work of that task. Its imposing presence, and the threat the Germans made of leveling the city with those guns if the French attempted to resist, was enough to quell the ardor of the garrison there. This was reinforced by planes off the German carriers, which were up like a swarm of hornets come first light, with the *Stukas* silencing shore batteries further east along the coast.

It would be weeks yet before the entire French Army would be completely disarmed, all airfields occupied, units taken under guard. As Kesselring had commented to Kurt Student, many wanted nothing more to do with the war, others were so determined that they fled into the countryside, hiding in the hopes of one day making contact with Allied forces. Some would again join the Free French under Giraud and De Gaulle, but most would simply become irrelevant, just as Darlan was in the end.

Hitler had made the fateful decision to make certain that France would not become a problem. One Korps of the 7th Army under General Freidrich

Dollmann was now in Vichy Controlled territory, and it was joined by the 334th Infantry Division arriving from Germany. Marshall Petain was given an ultimatum—he must either order all French units to stand down, or Germany would rescind the armistice and resume immediate hostilities in France.

With Admiral Darlan already dead at the hands of Juan Alfonso's diligence, and with Laborde in custody aboard the commandeered French Flagship, the plan to scuttle the French Fleet at Toulon failed. This time, the Germans had simply moved too swiftly, forewarned of this threat by Ivan Volkov. While several destroyer, a cruiser and three submarines were scuttled at Toulon, the bulk of the ships there were captured, and soon the *Normandie* would have a new name: *Friedrich de Gross*, and Axel Faust would have a new job.

Case Anton and Operation Lila to seize the French Fleet had been a great success, but it did have one very negative impact on Kesselring. The French troops he had relied upon to help in the defense of Morocco would also go through the catharsis of choosing sides. Most all of them would simply cease resistance as Patton's troops advanced. Some would join Free French Forces forming behind Allied lines, others would remain disgruntled and oppose to the Allied cause throughout the war, with some even fighting for Germany in Russia in Infantry Regiment 638. Yet for the most part, a transformation was now underway that would see the entire French Administration of their colonies in Africa collapse.

In the chaos of those hours, Kesselring found that he had no choice but to cede Morocco to the Americans. He would blame it all on the French, say they sabotaged the defense, but in reality, his primary intention was to extricate Student's precious Fallschirmjaeger battalions from the sure trap they would be in if they tried to defend Tangier, and instead get them east to the Algerian border on the rail line from Fez. It seemed that the entire Western front had been thrown into chaos, and the whirlwind of change was sweeping over the desolate reaches of North Africa.

If the Germans had waited another two weeks to put this plan in motion, it might have failed as the French came to see the fate that awaited them for their collaboration with Germany. Yet now, with their war just a few days old, the plan caught them by complete surprise. When he heard the news of what the Germans had done, Patton could not help a grin.

“Audacity,” he said. “War is simple, direct, and ruthless. A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week. This time it was a German plan. Tomorrow it will be an American plan. I intend to take every advantage of the confusion this is likely to cause. The French out there won’t know which way to point their goddamned rifles! Now’s the time to move. Montgomery is already 40 kilometers from Gibraltar, so I’m going to take Tangier in the next 48 hours, come hell or high water.”

Half a world away, it seemed to Anton Fedorov that he could feel that foreboding wind on the downwash from the rotors of a KA-40 as he boarded with a handful of other men. Soon that helo was rising up into the grey dawn, chopping its way west over Sakhalin Island and bound for a rendezvous with the airship *Irkutsk*, and soon after, Fedorov would meet with another version of the man he had been plotting with, Captain Vladimir Karpov, now filling the Siberian’s boots as Admiral of the Siberian Aerocorps.

Part X

Amok Time

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

Chapter 28

Fedorov was deeply worried. It wasn't the sudden appearance of the *Takami*, which should have been enough to rattle him given all he knew. What else might the eruption of Krakatoa have shaken loose? Was *Takami* the only aberration that may have resulted from that massive explosive event? Beyond that, what further damage did it do to the integrity of the continuum as a whole? Time was very fragile now, he knew, though he also knew he was speaking metaphorically to think this.

Time was a dimension, like length, height or depth in the three dimensions that defined space. How does one fracture depth, or length? The answer, of course, was that such a thing could not fracture in the normal sense of the word, but it could change. The length of something could be shortened, depth could be made greater or lessened. These dimensions were not simply concepts, they were physical realities, measurable, and subject to a creed of arcane laws that came to be called physics.

Yet time did not sit apart from those other three dimensions. It was intimately woven together with them to produce what Einstein came to call "Spacetime." While it still seemed strange for him to consider it, Einstein had theorized that spacetime could be warped, bent, curved, and in events like black holes, it might even break to the extent where movement from one point in spacetime to another was possible, vast distances covered with only minimal movement in time. Physics had proven all of this to be true, if anything mankind knew of the universe could ever be said to be a definitive truth.

So it was that the location of a process in spacetime could also change, or so his presence here in 1942 seemed to declare. It could move forward, or slip backwards along the continuum of the line of causality, something conveniently perceived by humans with their predilection for order. For men, one thing led to another, one moment to the next, even if that was merely a convention of thought, and the notion of future and past were only ways to describe what the universe was doing at a point relative to what it was doing now, in the "moment" anyone might choose to call their present. Words did not easily describe any of this, nor could the mind clinging to words and logic

easily grasp it, but there it was.

All Fedorov knew was, that for the whole of his life, this progression from now, to now plus one, had been the slow sedate passing of the days... tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Nothing had ever disturbed it, but that was no longer the case. Now things were sliding all over the continuum, and the stability of their place in any given “moment” was no longer certain. Nothing was solid or predictable, and so he thought of time as being cracked, broken, fragile, and tending to even greater fragility with every slip.

The moment Fedorov was calling his present was now 1942, and he was deeply concerned over something. It wasn't *Takami*, or the war, but time itself that he was musing on now. He looked about him, seeing a world that was clearly the result of actions he, himself, and others had taken in the past. Yes, there was Ivan Volkov and his Orenburg Federation, and here he was aboard *Kirov* fighting the Japanese in the Pacific—Japanese that now still occupied all of Primorskiy Province, including Vladivostok itself!

Karpov was trying to correct that historical aberration. He had already taken back Kamchatka, and was now successful in covering his invasion of Sakhalin Island. Then came the unexpected challenger, the hot missiles flying in a duel of 21st Century ships—certainly surprising and very dangerous, but not even a shadow compared to the peril he was contemplating now.

It came to him again, amid the jumble of things he dealt with each day, when Karpov had asked him whether there was any further risk of paradox ahead. He told him this seemed to be a safe time, because the ship did not vanish in August of 1941 as it had the first time around. He remembered how he explained it to Karpov.

“We vanished in August of 1941, sailed through that broken future to the Med, and then reappeared a full year later, in August of 1942, right in the middle of Operation Pedestal. With Malta gone, that history isn't likely to repeat, let alone the fact that we are still here in the Pacific. We never vanished last August like the first ship.”

“Should we fear that date, August of 1942? Might there be another paradox there?”

“No... I don't think so....”

Karpov nodded. *“So then, if there's no paradox to worry about come this August, what has you so spooked?”*

“Just what I discussed with you earlier. We could do something, cause a

change here that would knock out a key supporting beam holding up the future that built this ship. I've been thinking about that, and trying to discover what it could be, where the key event is that we must not disturb, and I think I may be on to something."

At that point their discussion had disintegrated into a search for the real Prime Mover on all these events. Was he to blame, or was it Orlov, or Karpov? Everyone had an opinion. But what was time doing here? Orlov's sudden awakening to the knowledge of events they had lived through in the Med was also disturbing, and as Fedorov considered those things, he lined up the dominoes in his mind, getting more anxious with each one he placed. Orlov jumped ship... I tried to kill him to erase him from the continuum, but he survived. Then, once we got back to Vladivostok in 2021, I tried to go back and rescue him, all with the aim of preserving the integrity of the history I knew.

That was a story that spun off in entirely unexpected directions, and it all had to do with Ilanskiy. It was there that I fell through to 1908, the Tunguska event, and there that I met Mironov. I effectively killed Josef Stalin with a single whisper in Mironov's ear. Volkov's pursuit also brought him to Ilanskiy, and in that, the Orenburg Federation was born. All of that depended on Orlov jumping ship, but that won't happen now, even though it was a root cause that gave rise to the world we're sailing in here.

Orlov jumped ship, and now he tells me how he leapt out of that helicopter, and I remember the ship's logs on that clearly—18:30 hours, on the 13th of August, 1942. This entire world depended on him surviving that jump... and I put five S-300s in the air to try and kill him before he could leap to safety. My god, this is what happens when a missile fails to get its target. This whole broken world is the result. Now the real problem asserted itself in his mind.

It's already late September. Orlov should have already jumped ship by now, but the world is still here. If this history is re-writing the old, like the Mona Lisa painted over some older image on the canvas, then how can this world still persist? It depends entirely on Orlov's jump, but that didn't happen. Could I be wrong about the importance of that event? Then something struck him like a thunderclap. He was wrong. It wasn't August 13 that mattered!

His heart was racing, and a queasy feeling of utter peril clamped down on

him. Orlov's jump didn't matter. That's not where the history really changed. It was something he did after that, and something I did in response.

I've been worried we would come to some essential pillar holding everything up, and then take some action to topple it, and this entire world along with it. *But that's not how it will happen.* It will happen by *inaction*, by Orlov failing to do something he did in the past... by me failing to react. then all the dominoes that fell from his earlier act come tumbling down. There would never be a reason for me to go after him, to ever meet with Sergei Kirov, or for Volkov to ever pursue me on the Trans-Siberian Rail. There could never be an Orenburg Federation.

His heart was pounding now, for time was creeping silently toward the real moment of truth. Tomorrow was the 27th of September, 1942. The world here held together until now because Orlov was just reveling in the bars and brothels of Spain this last month. He was picked up, put on a ship, and made his way to the Black Sea. But soon, in just a few days, he does something that truly matters, and when it is decidedly clear that can't happen, then time is in a real quandary. Then the meridians of fate diverge, and the history of these events moves forward on a line that takes it farther and farther from the time line that created it. How far can it go before Time realizes it is an impossible dead end, a line of causality that leads nowhere—a world that must end? My god, I was wrong! I told Karpov there was no risk of paradox here, but I was wrong. We're facing it all again—another Paradox Hour—September 30, 1942!

What can I do? The question pulsed at his temples. What can I do to create a situation here, on this timeline, that might justify or underpin its continuation? Yes, that was the key. Where Orlov failed to act, I must act in his place. In fact, I'm the only one who can act now to preserve this line of fate. I'm the reason things haven't already fallen apart here, because I know *exactly* what I would have to do. Time has been waiting for me to choose.

With that thought he was off at a run, heading for the officer's dining room where he knew he would always find Karpov at this hour. There was so little time, and so far to go, but if he failed to act, if he failed to get there in time....

* * *

“Settle down Fedorov, you’re working yourself up into a fit. Here, drink some wine and catch your breath. Now what is it that has you so upset?”

He went over the whole thing with Karpov, his unreasoning fear, and then the desperate attempt to discover where the key lever was on these events. It was just days away now, on the 30th of September.

“More of your crazy time theory? You are saying that this date is some kind of trip wire, and the whole world is about to blow up? How can I believe that?”

“Yes, it is crazy, and I’m not sure what we can expect. All I know is that the last time we faced a situation like this, bad things happened. The ship itself vanished!”

“I thought you said that was because of the imperative of its first coming. We don’t have that now in this situation. We steered north for Murmansk, not south into the Denmark Strait. That was a major point of divergence—yes? You see, I’ve thought about all of this as well. Remember, I faced the wrath of time alone aboard *Tunguska*, and... well... here I am, enjoying this nice cut of meat. You should try it, Fedorov. It would do you some good.”

“Eat? With all this in the air? No, we’ve got to work this through—determine what we can do about it. I have a plan.”

“A plan? Good Lord, Fedorov, I’ve heard that one before. It was your crazy plans that set all this in motion.”

“I thought that once myself, but no longer. In one sense, yes, what you say is true. But a man must have a reason to take action, and without Orlov jumping ship as he did, I would have had no reason to go after him.”

“Alright, I argued this myself when you were looking so glum the other day. So what are you saying—Orlov caused everything, and now he can’t raise havoc here by jumping ship?”

“Yes.”

“And because of this, the world we’re in has no basis to even exist? What? Do you expect it all to simply vanish tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow,” said Fedorov, settling down now, and taking Karpov’s advice to quaff down some wine. “In three days we reach a critical point in this whole story. It wasn’t simply Orlov’s doing, it was mine.”

“There you go again.”

“Hear me out,” Fedorov raised a hand. “Alright, Orlov jumps ship. I fired those five S-300s at him, on your urging, and we think we got him. So what

reason did I have to take any further action at that point? None. It wasn't until I was doing that research back in Vladivostok, and came across that letter he wrote, that I had reason to suspect he was alive."

"Letter? Ah... I remember now, the letter from a dead man. Orlov kept a journal, and somehow a page turned up on the Internet."

"Exactly! In that letter he talked about where he was, and what had happened to him. And he dated it—*30 September, 1942*. That was the critical act, *the writing of that letter*. On that day, Orlov created evidence of his existence in the past, and as fate had it, I found that evidence. We had other clues as well—remember what Nikolin said about that card game he played with Orlov before he jumped ship?"

"Yes, yes—Nikolin, Nikolin, Nikolin, you lose."

"Correct. So we got clues of his existence, but that letter was the real key. It gave us an exact time and place where we could find him—Kizlyar, on the 30th of September, 1942, and with that evidence, I hatched the plan to go rescue him. So you see, the key date is September 30. That's the day I was convinced we had to take action, and we both know how that all turned out."

"Alright, so what are you saying now, that the world will end on September 30 if we take no action? Let me humor you and grant you the fact that we may be facing some kind of paradox here. How can you be sure anything will happen on the 30th of this month? Why not on the day you actually did take action, the day you put the plan in motion and shifted back from the Primorskiy Engineering Center? Even then, your arrival in 1942 was prone to any number of outcomes at that point. Anything could have happened. You might not have even stopped at Ilanskiy as you did."

"But I *did* stop there, and something tells me that was fated."

"It was mere happenstance, Fedorov."

"Was it? Think... What are the odds that Ivan Volkov also stops at that inn in 2021. I used the back stairway, and so did he, not once, but twice to reach the year 1908, just as I did. And why did the ship fall all the way back to that same year when that Demon Volcano erupted?"

"I ended up in 1945," said Karpov.

"And after that? You got into trouble there, didn't you, and you used a nuke."

Karpov pursed his lips. "What of it?"

"Then where did the ship go? To 1908, that's where. Don't you see?"

Shifts to this time in the 1940s are linked in some odd way to 1908. It's as if that year is a kind of magnet. Everything falls through to 1908, but we've never gone back any farther than that, not in all the many shifts we've tried. It's always somewhere in the 1940s, and then back to 1908, just like the stairway at Ilanskiy. Well, I think I know why—the Tunguska event. That's what set all this time business in motion. I think that was the blow that first shattered the meridian. We've got residue from that explosion right here aboard ship, in Rod-25, and we both know what it causes when we mix it with a nuclear reaction. And when I sent Troyak and the Marines to try and destroy that railway inn, who finds something odd in the taiga when their airship gets blown off course and ends up on the Stony Tunguska? Orlov! See how all of this is wound up together?"

Karpov nodded. He was beginning to see Fedorov's point now, as he had thought about all this for many hours himself. "You know," he began, "I once contemplated simply going down those stairs and finding Volkov—killing him there in 1908. Then again I also contemplated going *up* the stairway and killing him in 2021, before he ever discovers it. Then I changed my mind, and decided it would be so much better to fight him here—kill him here, and then live with that. You see, I have no intention of ever leaving this world—not to go back to the future. If I never see our time again that will suit me just fine"

Fedorov nodded. "Then you should realize that if I don't take action to prevent it, everything here could be... compromised. I can't say I know what might happen, but I can certainly feel it. Don't you? Can't you sense impending doom in all of this? All I know is what Kamenski once told me. Time is tidy. She likes things neat, a zero sum game when it comes to changes and variations in the meridians. She will find a way to punish those who challenge her order, and those who have cut through the loom of fate where she's been weaving."

"How very colorful. Well, she had every reason to get rid of me when we faced that last paradox, and look now—I am redoubled!"

"At the moment," said Fedorov, feeling more than thinking in expressing that. "Hitler once did a jig in Paris. Berlin burned five years later. Have you considered what your situation would be now if one of those missiles had struck us?"

"Certainly, but none did. Our defenses were simply too good—I was

simply too good, and if this Mother Time you speak of so fancifully wants to pick a fight with me, she'll regret it. That said... what is it you propose?"

There was always a crack in Karpov's brave outer face, and Fedorov perceived one here. He understands what I'm saying, he thought. But what should we do?

"Admiral," he began, "unless you want to see our situation here fatally compromised, you had better heed what I'm telling you now. Here is what I have in mind."

Chapter 29

“**Ilanskiy,**” said Fedorov. “That’s the key to this whole situation. We both know that. From there we have absolute power to effect changes in the timeline.”

“I have absolute power, not you, Fedorov. I control Ilanskiy. All you could think of doing there was sending in Troyak and his Marines to blow the place to hell. Well, I remedied that. It’s been rebuilt from the original plans, and I had the advantage of taking some very accurate measurements... in 1908. Yes, I was there myself, Fedorov. There are things I haven’t told you.”

“You went down those stairs?”

“Not exactly. But you realize I spent a good long while in 1908 before you showed up with your submarine.” Karpov lied now, leading Fedorov to think that he went to Ilanskiy after the ship took him back to 1908 to have his argument with Admiral Togo. He did not want to get into the strange shift he made aboard *Tunguska*, or how he consequently flew to Ilanskiy at that time.

“So what would you do if you could utilize that stairway again? How do you propose that we can somehow shore up the reality of this world? Yes, I understand your logic. Orlov doesn’t jump ship, you never go back after him, and you never meet Sergei Kirov. Volkov never goes after you. Stalin survives, and this world looks entirely different. Russia is not divided, and we get a situation that looks very much like the world we came from. Well isn’t that what you might wish for? Isn’t that what you’ve been striving to recreate all along as you defended your precious history?”

“It’s too broken now,” said Fedorov with a shrug. “I realize I can never restore things as they once were.”

“But you believe time can do this? You think it will rearrange all the pieces on the board and this little chess game will look quite different come the 1st of October, with Stalin crowned King again? That should suit you fine, because the position would be much like the one we left behind in Severomorsk. Then again, you might just get your wish and save your history by doing nothing here. Let the impossibility of this meridian stand, and leave it all up to time to fix things. If you are correct, then this meridian, as you call it, leads time nowhere. There is no foundation for it at all. Yes, I

understand the threat quite well. It's just that I can't see how time could do anything on such a grand scale to alter this world like that—eliminate it, annihilate it, start everything new. That is what would have to happen here—complete and utter annihilation. That's not very tidy, Fedorov. Do you really foresee something like that?"

"Hasn't it already happened once?" said Fedorov. "Where is Stalin? The world we came from, that entire history, is completely gone. If that isn't annihilation, then what is?"

"Not completely gone," said Karpov. "Remember your analogy of the cracked mirror. Yes, in places we will look at this history and it will be impossibly wrong. Yet in others, it remains remarkably consistent. The Allies are launching their Operation Torch even as we speak."

"It's drastically different this time."

"And yet they called it Torch, just as they did in the old history. That may seem like an inconsequential detail, but there are thousands of things like that which remain consistent."

"But the longer this goes on," said Fedorov, "the more distorted the history gets. Take the fighting on the Volga. That will look nothing at all like the old battle of Stalingrad. I tell you, it's a line that diverges from the original, and the farther it goes, the wider that divergence becomes. Soon the world will be so completely changed, and that I cannot see any way this ship would have ever been built, and that is a real paradox. Is it not? How could this world exist, if the ship that caused it to come into being was never built? No, this time line leads to an impossible dead end. Time must deal with that—unless we do something first. We can possibly sustain it a little longer, if I go warn Kirov of his fate like I did before. That at least buys us some time, until the next paradox crops up."

"The next Paradox? There's more?"

"Oh, there's more alright—you made certain of that when you ended up in 1908."

"That was happenstance. I had no intention of ever going there when I took the Red Banner Fleet out in 2021. It was that damn volcano—"

"And that damn little nuke you threw at the Americans in 1945."

"They deserved everything they got."

"That isn't my point!" Fedorov could not help just a little anger in his tone. "Suppose I warn Kirov and buy us some time. We were supposed to

shift forward to 2021 soon, which sets that entire series of events in motion.”

“None of that has to ever happen,” said Karpov. “For example, knowing what I know now, I could easily avoid the Demon Volcano. You see. Free will, Fedorov. This isn’t all fated to reoccur. What happens is entirely up to me.”

“You misunderstand me. I’m saying that if it doesn’t reoccur, then nothing you did in 1908 will have happened. You don’t duel with Admiral Togo, Japan never invades Siberian territory in 1908, nor do I have any reason to go after you with Rod-25 aboard *Kazan*—so you don’t shift forward to 1938 as you did here. Understand? Your existence in your present position becomes unsustainable. *You* face Paradox again—did you enjoy it that last time?”

“Alright. I see your point. Saving Kirov just buys us a little time. We then have more hurtles to jump, and if we don’t? If I do nothing to try and resolve these problems, what then? You can’t believe this will all just end, come to a stop, vanish. It seems preposterous to even contemplate such an outcome.”

Fedorov thought, his eyes suddenly alight with realization. “No,” he began. “It won’t just end—it will loop! That’s what’s happening here now. This is the middle of a time loop. It’s the second time the ship has arrived in the past. The history is repeating, only it’s very distorted now. Time didn’t end, it just looped back on itself.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov, also thinking now. “Then you believe this is what will happen again? July 28th of 1941 is long gone. How could it start all over again?”

“Because in the course of these events *Kirov* shifted to a time prior to that first coming. That’s what set up the first paradox, and now we’re facing another. If I take no action, this time line becomes impossible in just three days, unless Sergei Kirov survives. Then it at least has some rational underpinning for a little while longer—perhaps long enough for us to deal with what comes next. But in three days, if I don’t act, Sergei Kirov’s existence here has no foundation. He shouldn’t be alive, because I will not have warned him of his fate. That becomes an insoluble problem for time, and its only solution is to loop the history back on itself, play the game again, and see if it can reach an alternative solution.”

“And if it fails to do so, what then? Checkmate?”

“No... Stalemate, a game where neither side can win. The old time line

cannot be restored, the new one can have no basis for existence, and so round and round it goes—forever.”

“That may be our fate, Fedorov. This may be inevitable. What gets you so hot to do anything here? You yourself admit that saving Kirov is just a temporary measure. Is that what you have in mind? You haven’t even said anything about your plan.”

“Ilanskiy,” said Fedorov. “Yes. If I go there, and retrace my steps down those stairs, I believe I will return to 1908.”

“What makes you so certain of that?”

“I’m not sure, but I think there is a kind of connection with each traveler on those stairs to a given time. I went down once, and returned precisely to the point in time I had just left.”

“I did the same,” said Karpov, “only I was going *up*, and I saw what was happening in 2021 when the missiles started to fly.”

“So you retreated, just as I did, and you ended up exactly where you started. Who can say why? Yet it happens that way. So I think I would end up the same place if I went down those stairs again—1908—and on a very special day that year. I saw the burning light of the Tunguska event. I saw it happen, Karpov. And I sat down to breakfast with Sergei Kirov that morning, if only for a very brief moment. He was calling himself by an alias at that time—Mironov.”

“Then you think you would meet him there again?” Now Karpov leaned forward, his voice a near hush, and he was suddenly very interested. His flippant manner had evaporated, and the edge of bravado was gone.

“You think you would find Kirov there as before?”

“Yes.”

“And what would you do?”

Fedorov waited a moment. “If I told him about Stalin, revealed the date of his death by assassination, then he might act just as we know he has. He might kill Stalin again, and then we build one strong pillar of iron beneath the world we’re sitting on here.”

“Yes...” said Karpov, thinking it through now. “But what about Volkov? He’s the one who builds the Orenburg Federation. If what you said earlier is true, and we do nothing, then there is no reason for Volkov to even exist in this time line. He should vanish, or meet some other untimely end if time gets its way, and that would be a well deserved fate for him.”

“I’m not certain about Volkov, but remember, each person that walks that stairway gets somewhere, unerringly, and they are linked to a very specific time. For some, there is no effect at all. Troyak told me he followed my footprints down those stairs but nothing happened to him at all. He just met Zykov at the bottom and they continued their search for me.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “Volkov came down and said he met NKVD there at the inn. Then he went down a second time to reach 1908. I wonder, Fedorov. What day was that? Might his younger self be fated to come down this year, just as before? I must tell you that I sent Tyrenkov up once to see what we could discover about Volkov. We saw him, right there, getting off the train with his men in 2021. So what if he appears here in 1942 on the same day he did before he went to 1908? That would mean the version of himself here is facing paradox, just as we all were. Can there be two versions of Volkov here, just as I survive in this world with my brother self?”

“Hard to say,” said Fedorov. “Everything I once believed told me that things, people, could not co-locate. That’s why I think our ship vanished before Paradox Hour, to make way for the imperative of *this* ship’s arrival.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “Time certainly shuffled the deck there, didn’t she? Someone slipped an extra Ace into the cards.” He smiled. “And we end up with you here, yet remembering everything that happened, a strong King in the deck, while everyone else on the ship is still in the fog of unknowing.”

That wasn’t true, Fedorov knew, but he said nothing about the fact that Orlov was also a Jack of Fate now, knowing all the things he lived through in the first coming of the ship. He got back to the question at hand.

“Then again....” Fedorov eyed Karpov, as if looking to gauge his mood. “There is another alternative, the opposite side of the coin. I could also see that Kirov *never* survives.” He let that stand there for a moment, again, watching Karpov closely.

The Admiral’s eyes narrowed, for this was something he had also considered. “You are suggesting we eliminate Sergei Kirov? Then we get Stalin back.”

“More than likely.”

“Why would we want that?”

“Because it’s what happened, at least in the history we know. And considering how this war is going, I have real doubts as to whether we can prevail in Russia. The Germans have linked up with Volkov’s troops, and

now everything south of the Don is cut off. Those troops will have to live off the land, and there will be no reinforcements, supplies or equipment replacements.”

“Yes,” said Karpov darkly. “Volkov is already starting to shift divisions back to the Siberian front. He’s beefed up his position on the Ob River line, and started construction on five new airships. To make matters worse. We lost *Angara* last week. The reports are hazy, but my Tyrenkov says he had information that the Germans have an airship program underway now as well. There was a raid north of Kansk, but the enemy ship slipped away before we could get stronger units up there to see about it.”

“Can you hold along the Ob?”

“For the moment. I sent a lot of manpower west to the Soviets—five Shock Armies. We’re raising more divisions, but the ranks are thinner now, and the factory relocation program is still underway. Production is starting to gain some momentum, but we’ve a long way to go. The Germans already have new tanks, much stronger than in the old history, or so I’m told.”

“Everything is accelerated in terms of weapons development,” said Fedorov. “I would not be surprised to see the Germans deploying rocket weaponry by mid 1943, and perhaps even jet fighters. This war is far from over, and we could still lose it.”

“Hence your suggestion concerning Sergei Kirov.”

“Correct.”

“How could we be certain that would restore the balance?”

“Stalin,” said Fedorov. “He was the strong hand on the back of the commissars’ necks. It was Stalin’s utter brutality that held the Soviet Union together as we knew it.”

“No argument there, Fedorov, but if he came back into this history, what would things look like here?” Karpov gave him a searching look.

“It’s likely that Kolchak would have been killed long ago, and all of Siberia and the far east would be Soviet controlled.”

“Which puts me out of a job,” said Karpov. “I’m not sure I like that. It hasn’t been easy to get where I am today.”

“Of course, but that is a likely outcome. As for Volkov, he was able to knock off Denikin and seize control of the White movement, but then he would be up against Stalin. In spite of Volkov’s edge in knowing the future course of the history, I might bet on the Man of Steel in that matchup.

Suppose Stalin defeats him, treats Volkov like any of the other rivals he faced, and eliminates him?”

“That would solve our problem with the Orenburg Federation.”

“Perhaps. Stalin was a massive force in the history. Bringing him back will certainly change things, but it is impossible to predict everything from this vantage point. We’d only be guessing.”

“Yet this Mother Time you speak of might like such a change. She’d get her boyfriend Stalin back, and he might clean up a good deal of the mess we’ve created for her.”

“Right,” said Fedorov. “But with Stalin come the purges, assassinations, the gulags and slave labor camps. These were all the things that Sergei Kirov saw when he went up those stairs at Ilanskiy. His single act in killing Stalin was perhaps the bravest thing ever done in the 20th Century. But this is the result.” Fedorov extended a hand to the unseen world beyond the bulkheads of the ship.

“And what happens to us—you, me, the ship and crew?”

“I don’t know, but if I had to guess, I think we would phase shift.”

“What is that?”

“Remember how the ship pulsed in time on the earlier missions? We moved in and out of 1942, particularly when we were in the Pacific. Remember the cruiser *Tone* sailing right through us during one of those shifts?”

“How could anyone forget that nightmare.”

“Well, if we take any action in 1908, we must also act on this end of things. This ship still has Rod-25.”

“I’ve told Dobrynin to remove it from the maintenance cycle and store it.”

“Yes, but that order can be rescinded.”

“You’re suggesting we use Rod-25 and attempt another time displacement?”

“We must put the ship in play at the very same moment I go down those steps. Then all the cards are in time’s hand, and she can shuffle the deck and deal.”

Karpov shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not sure I like that idea.”

“What you mean to say is that you don’t like casting your fate to the wind like that, and putting yourself at the mercy of time.”

“I stared her down once before,” said Karpov, his tone heavy with

determination.

“Yes, you may have, but no man ever escapes her final judgment. You are here for a while, Karpov, but not forever. Time is the fire in which we all burn—no exceptions.”

Karpov rubbed his chin, his eyes shifting about. He never liked to consider his own mortality. He had worked out ideas like this, thinking how he could eliminate Volkov with the stairway at Ilanskiy, but always decided against it. He told himself that he wanted to settle that affair man to man, and defeat Volkov here. He told himself that this was the world he built, and he was determined to Lord over it to the end of his days. Now he was looking at the prospect of losing everything—giving it all back to Stalin. He was once reduced to mere flotsam in the ocean until that Japanese fisherman pulled him out. Now he could lose everything he fought and strived for if Fedorov did this thing.

“And if you do this, and we choose life for Sergie Kirov? Then what?”

“I’m not sure how, but I think if I begin this task, and secure the rise of Sergei Kirov in place of Stalin, then time might find a way to account for Volkov here. She’d have to. I’ll be the culprit again if I do this. Who knows, perhaps I will not even survive the attempt. Time might find a way to get rid of me, and end my feckless tampering. As it stands, the 30th of September was the day I decided to act last time, and so we have only three days to work this out. I can choose to act, or not act. I can choose Stalin or Kirov. It’s all on me again.”

Chapter 30

“**Not** exactly,” said Karpov, folding his arms. His meat was long cold, but the wine was still good, and he took a long sip. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Fedorov. I decide what happens here, not you. My word is final, but let’s consider it from a practical standpoint first. How would you carry out this mission.”

Fedorov thought for a moment. “I take a KA-40 inland over Siberia, and rendezvous with one of your airships. I board that, and then it’s off to Ilanskiy. Easy enough.”

“Suppose you did this—repeated your warning to Kirov. How can you be sure he would ever act on it, or go so far as to kill Stalin?”

“Because I could explain all that to him, reinforce how important it would be. He was already pre-disposed to act that way. I think a little nudge in the right direction would do the job. If I do this, I have at least given Time some justification for the continuance of these Altered States, at least for a while.”

“Alright, and suppose we leave the matter of Volkov to time. What about the situation we’re facing here? I’m invading Sakhalin Island because the Japanese are sitting on a good chunk of Siberian territory, and all that happened long ago, after my sortie with the ship to 1908. How does time deal with that?”

“One step at a time,” said Fedorov. “First we save Kirov, then we work out how to deal with the paradoxes you set up with your shift to 1908.”

“We already know that Sergei Kirov fails to defeat Volkov or unite Russia. He didn’t fix it, so let’s consider the other side of the coin—you *don’t* warn Kirov, and he dies. Are you saying Stalin would correct all this? Would he take back the territory we lost in 1908, and do so before this war begins?”

“You’re asking me things I cannot answer.”

“But is that what you would want? Here I am trying to undo all the damage that happened from my ill fated sortie to 1908 and do exactly that. Don’t you want to get the train back on the tracks, Fedorov?”

“I don’t think that’s possible now.”

“Ah, you don’t think it’s actually *off* the tracks, but only diverted to another rail line.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov, “and it’s heading for a cliff. The Japanese are going to be more of an adversary than you think. They’ll fight you tooth and nail, even in defeat. They’ll force you to expend every last missile you have, and each time you confront them, you get weaker and weaker. Face it, Karpov. It will take the Americans to truly defeat them. You may take Sakhalin after a long slog here, but Vladivostok is quite another matter, and don’t think you’ll ever invade Japan successfully. That is what it would take to force their capitulation.”

“You’re forgetting I have three nuclear warheads aboard this ship. All it took was two in the old history. The Americans chose Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I could choose Tokyo, Yokohama, Osaka.”

“Chaos,” said Fedorov. “If you use those weapons we have no way of knowing what might happen. Time is so fragile now that it could shatter completely. You talked about that Japanese cruiser reaping the whirlwind. That’s what we would be facing.”

“Doom and gloom, Fedorov. All this talk of time shattering is mere speculation. You said yourself that you can’t really say what might happen, no matter whether we act or not. However, I do like one thing you said here. I like this time loop business.”

Fedorov widened his eyes. “What?”

“Yes, and don’t look so surprised. If that were to happen, how might it play out?”

“What do you mean?”

“How would the loop start again this time?”

“Well... I suppose the ship would have to move again, to a time before it first arrived. We all would.”

“Might we prevent that?”

“We might, but don’t underestimate time. If I’m correct, and this is the only choice time has, then it will find a way. Many of our shifts were involuntary.”

“In that case, what you said a moment ago would not be true.” Karpov smiled.

“What are you talking about?”

“I would survive. I wouldn’t die, would I? Perhaps you would survive as well. We would all just start things over, only just a little wiser—just as you did, remembering everything that came before. Don’t you see. This is what

has already happened! If this loop repeats, then it happens again... and I live forever....”

Fedorov just stared at him, unable to believe he could be so selfish. “You mean you would let this time loop occur simply to sustain your own personal life indefinitely? My God, Karpov. You can’t be serious.”

“Now don’t get all huffy on me. I was only speculating. Yet you must admit, that this endless time loop might not be so bad, as long as we survive each time. A man could drink a lot of good wine—forever. He could eat well, have the finest women on this earth, over, and over, again and again.”

“Yes, you might see it as your nice private heaven,” said Fedorov “always in the know, satisfying every appetite, while the world spins through the loop, oblivious. Well, let me tell you that some very strange things could happen in that event. Your little heaven could start disintegrating before your very eyes. I’ve seen this. And beyond that, nothing would ever resolve. Your life would never reach a point of fulfillment. You would loop through these years, the struggle to win, but that final victory would never be grasped. If you ask me, that’s a nice private hell... over and over again.”

“Oh, you never know, Fedorov. Give me enough time, and I’ll find a way to win.” Karpov smiled, then set his wine down, considering the situation further.

“There is still the second alternative,” he said. “We could help time along and just kill Kirov where he sits there in 1908. If we go with the honey, and spare Kirov, then he might kill Stalin to justify this world. But then we’d still have all the other unresolved paradoxes to deal with. Furthermore, even if you do warn Kirov, there’s no guarantee he’d follow through as before and kill Stalin. You see? There is no certainty to that alternative. Too many things remain outside our direct control.”

“I see your point,” said Fedorov.

“On the other hand, if we go with the vinegar to catch our flies, we just make sure of things, and do Stalin’s work for him a little early by killing Kirov in 1908. Then Stalin survives by default. The history rolls forward from that point. He takes power, probably unites all Russia, gulags and all. That solves our problem with the Japanese, and he’ll probably get rid of Volkov for us in the bargain. As sad as it seems, Stalin could simply be our best move here. Could you do it, Fedorov? Do you really think you could go down those stairs and kill Sergei Kirov if I were to make that decision?”

“Decisiveness is often the art of timely cruelty,” said Fedorov. He was quoting the French dramatist Henry Becque when he said that, but still wondering whether he could master that art. That was what Sergie Kirov had mustered the courage to do when he went into that dank prison cell in Baku with a revolver and fired the shot that changed all history. Could he do that—and to Kirov himself?

What about the alternative? What if he simply repeated what he had already done once before in warning Kirov of his fated death by assassination. That would suit his temperament quite well, but he swallowed hard to think that he would be the man who made the same mistake twice to write this history. If he did that, and it was enough to justify the continuance of this time line, could they solve all the other paradoxes, and then find a way to win this war? If he chose the honey instead of vinegar, he knew that he was abandoning, forever, any hope of returning the history to its old course. Yet to do so, to kill Kirov and return Stalin to the meridian as Master of the Soviet Union, would cause wrenching, all consuming change here. He had no idea how that would all play out, but he had experienced some inkling of it on a smaller scale. It frightened him to even think on it.

“Timely cruelty,” said Karpov. “Yes, I like that, but I wonder if you have that in you, Fedorov. If you are correct, and we do nothing, then you say this time line is doomed to wither and die, or to simply loop about in circles forever. How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because I’ve seen how it happens—the withering—on the ship when we faced the last paradox. Men went missing. The ship itself seemed like it was having difficulty remaining stable. Even the structure began to warp and change. We phased and my boots got stuck in the deck, right there on the bridge. We had one man who was found half embedded in the deck of the galley—Lenkov. His torso was visible, but below that deck, there was no sign of the rest of him—until the Marines found his legs in a locker on the helo deck. Things were happening all over the ship like that. Then men started to go missing. Orlov disappeared, and others too.”

“He disappeared?”

“Yes... and I think I ended up vanishing as well. Time must have picked me up like a chess piece, and dropped me here, on this ship. Who knows why? I’ve asked myself that a hundred times. Perhaps it’s because I was fated to make this choice—to figure all this out.”

“So we either make our choice in this matter here, and carry it out, or do nothing and possibly suffer these strange effects you describe?”

“Not just us—everyone—everything. If we do nothing, and this meridian has no basis for continued existence, then it will begin to disintegrate. That’s what I think was beginning aboard the ship, but it would happen everywhere. Who knows how long it would take, the slow withering of this reality. And in that instance, it matters little whether we win or lose this war. Things fall apart, and that’s what could happen here.”

Karpov took a deep breath. Was this possible? It seemed utter lunacy, but Fedorov seemed so deathly serious. He had sorted through the consequences of their actions here many times, and he was often correct with his theories. But this? The whole world on the chopping block of time?

He considered the choice before them now. His inclination was to simply do nothing, and see what would happen, yet there was a part of him that had been tempted to take decisive action at Ilanskiy, and for a very long time. He had never quite mustered the courage to do so, and always found excuses to justify his timidity. Now, here was Fedorov, brave hearted Fedorov, ready to take on all Fate and Time.

Timely cruelty... Could he do this thing?

“If I send you,” he began, feeling like a man who was edging out to a precipice, “then you will not go alone. I will come with you.”

“You? And leave the ship? Who will coordinate the shift here? We need someone who knows the history of all we’ve done. If the ship reappears in some other time, it will take a well educated head, and a steady hand on the tiller to judge what to do—could you do that, Karpov? Could you do what is right for a change, instead of only acting to further your own interests? You wonder if I have that ounce of cruelty in me, as I wonder whether you would have an ounce of reason—or compassion, if it was needed.”

“Touché, Fedorov. Let me correct myself. I will go with you, but it will be my brother that makes this journey in my place. He’ll be on *Tunguska* when you get inland, and I’ll speak with him via encrypted radio to explain what we are going to attempt to do. As for timely cruelty, I have my doubts about your ability to follow through. But my brother will have no such scruples. Yes, timely cruelty will come easily for him. All in a day’s work.”

“I see... Then you’ve decided. You want me to kill Sergei Kirov, or at the very least to refrain from warning him as I did. You want me to leave him to

Stalin.”

“You should want the same. It’s the only decision that brings us towards a solution here. It bends the history back as it was, gets the train back on the right track again. Unfortunately, Stalin will be back in charge, but I’ll find a way to deal with him later.”

“What? You? Deal with Stalin?”

“Believe me, Fedorov, that will not be as difficult as you might think. In fact, I think it would be much easier than trying to sort out all these impossible paradoxes. Yes. I said so earlier, and now I’m inclined to feel this is our only clear choice. Sergei Kirov has to die. He’s a maverick, an aberration, and because of the power he wields, history is all bent out of shape. I’m betting that one trip down those steps does us a world of good here. I’m betting we come out of our shift, find Volkov and his damn Orenburg Federation gone, Stalin back in charge, and the Germans on their way to certain defeat in Russia. There’s no other way, Fedorov. This is what we have to do, and I’ll send my brother self along with you to make sure it gets done correctly.”

“There’s only one problem,” said Fedorov. “Remember what I said. We never quite know where a person ends up when he uses that staircase. In some instances, it is like Old Faithful, and I’ve already stated that I think it will take me right back to the same time—June 30, 1908. But will it send your brother there as well?”

“I see your point.... We’ll just have to handcuff the two of you together. Where you go, my brother goes. Would it work?”

“I have no way of knowing,” said Fedorov.

“Well, is there any reason I could not shift back to that date?”

“That depends. You could not go to a time when you already existed in 1908. When did you first arrive there?”

“Let me see...” Karpov tried to remember, but even that was difficult. He did not want to think back on it, back through the pain of Armageddon, back to that time when he betrayed Volsky’s trust, and led the ship and crew like Satan leading his fallen angels in a war against heaven. Yes, he had fired his nuke. That’s when it happened.... He felt stunned at first, light headed. Then his numbed brain began to work again, and his senses began to assemble the clues in his mind—the light, the changing color of the sky, the eerie luminescence of the sea, and the hushed silence of the enveloping fog. He

knew what had happened. They had shifted again.

“Yes... We ran across an old clipper ship, and they were sending us Morse Code. I had Nikolin signal that we had lost our ship’s chronometer, and asked for a current reading of the date and time. It was 10 July, 1908.”

“My God,” said Fedorov. That is just ten days after I arrived there.”

“Then if my brother goes with you, and you both arrive June 30, he has at least ten days to get the job done—correct?”

“I suppose so, said Fedorov, wishing he had never come to Karpov with this. He had thought he would be off to shore up Sergei Kirov’s life here, a man he admired greatly, in spite of the fact that he gave this ship to Karpov, betraying the trust of Admiral Volsky. Now he was going to murder him....

Part XI

Second Thoughts

*“Is it wise to move along the path, hoping for what may never come,
or to go back and change your course for the likely?”*

— Jasmin Morin

Chapter 31

Karpov was pacing, as he often did when something was bothering him. Now he was having second thoughts about Fedorov's operation, and wondering what could possibly happen if he let it be.

He tells me he must act, he thought, or this world has no basis to exist. He says it will wither away, warp, fracture, but God only knows how. In that instance, my little steel reign here comes to an eventual end. If he warns Kirov, that only buys us a little more time before the next paradox raises its ugly head. If he kills Kirov, then things should look much different for me here as well, particularly if we are correct and we get Stalin back.

I'm supposed to put that damnable control rod back in the system and run the procedure at the precise moment Fedorov goes down those steps with my brother self. Everything must be in play, he tells me. Time must have all the cards in her greedy hands before she shuffles the deck. But what kind of hand will I be dealt this time? I worked damn hard to get where I am. Now all this will simply vanish, fall apart, or I'll end up playing second fiddle to Stalin. He'll be much more difficult to deal with than Sergei Kirov, in spite of my boast to Fedorov on that score. What am I doing here?

And yet... If this does work as Fedorov believes, then a good many problems on my desk get resolved. Stalin would probably settle accounts with Volkov, and the Japanese will get their comeuppance. Since I'm not taking the ship back to 1908 as before, then they have no reason to invade Siberian territory. We could come out of the shift and find we already have Vladivostok back, with no need to bully the Japanese further, unless I decide to help the Americans here.

Should I? They get very powerful here in the Pacific by 1945, and enforce their own steel reign for decades after. Remember how Captain Tanner bragged about that. He as much as told me that the Pacific was his beat, until I put my missiles up his ass. He smiled at that, a little consolation in the midst of his worrisome muse. Then he sighed, looking ahead, thinking hard about the future that might arise from this meridian.

I'll beat the Japanese, he thought. There was no Midway disaster last May, but I can arrange for that. I could get after the carriers here easily

enough, and smash each and every last one. But what about this damn Japanese missile destroyer? I suppose their SM-2s might be able to hold us off for a while, but they can't stop torpedoes, can they? One way or another, I'll get their carriers, and I'll get that damn destroyer as well.

But can the Soviets hold off Germany. Can I stop Volkov on the ground? It will be years before the action in the west presents any real threat to the Germans. This so called Second Front will be futzing about in North Africa for a good long while. Until then, the war in the east will be the real crisis point. Can we win? Supposing we do, even if it takes the use of my special warheads. Then what does the post war world look like?

I suppose Russia gets reunified. Do I then see the Free Siberian State folded under Sergei Kirov's reign? I have ample room to negotiate there, and well before the war ends. If Kirov reneges, I've always got Ilanskiy... Assuming I survive this whole affair.

That was what was really bothering him, as selfish as it seemed. The world could all go to hell, get twisted back on itself like a pretzel, but none of that would matter to Karpov as long as he was still in power, still lording it over the oceans of the world aboard his invincible battlecruiser. He could not see how things could simply change here all at once, or vanish. He had no idea what Fedorov was talking about with his dire warnings, but he was deathly worried about his own sad fate.

If what Fedorov says is true, he realized, I should not be here. In order for me to be in this position, I must first go to 1908, and then come forward again as I did. I'm gloating that Volkov never arises here, but what about me? What about my Free Siberian State? If we kill Sergei Kirov, how do I still end up controlling any of this? Siberia will be Soviet territory, Stalin's little Gulag farm. And what happens to my airship fleet; my brother?

Then something struck him like a hammer. Just a moment, he thought. This world is the result of actions we took earlier, when the ship first vanished in the Norwegian Sea. It's the result of Fedorov's little hunt for Orlov, and my unexpected visit to 1908, all of it. Fedorov's rescue mission gives us Sergei Kirov and Ivan Volkov, and my sortie in 1908 sets up this entire situation in the Pacific. *But those things didn't happen here. Not on this meridian.* We went north to Murmansk, not south to the Denmark Strait. So in this time line, we never fought the British, never went to the Med, and never fought the Japanese as I did when I pounded Yamato before we shifted

home again. *None of that ever happens here!*

But it clearly did happen, because I remember each and every minute of it. By God, I've even got that damn magazine we found in the Pacific that told us how the war started in 2021. I've got a real and tangible thing from that sequence of events. How is that possible? Clearly, all those other events happened on another time line, not this one. This is just the altered reality those events created, and the ship that caused all this has vanished. But here I am, a remnant from that other time line, just like that magazine!

The realization struck him deeply now. He was mere flotsam, just as he was when time dropped him into the Sea of Japan in 1938. Why? How did this happen? How come I appeared here, and how could that magazine exist here?

Time makes mistakes.

That was all he could think of. Time isn't perfect, and the chaos we caused was so great, that she slipped a few stitches. That satisfied where the magazine was concerned, but not for his own personal fate.

I'm not just anybody, he thought. I'm Vladimir Karpov. I built this entire world! I was the one who pissed off Orlov. Absent that, he never jumps ship. So all of this is my doing, because I am first cause for this world to exist. That is why I persist here—why I will continue to persist. Time might dearly love to get rid of me, but she can't, I'm just too damn important. Without me, none of this ever happens.

But what about my brother?

Who is the pretender to the throne here, me or my brother? How could time allow him to enter my world while I was here? Ah... but I *wasn't* here. That's what all that travail was aboard *Tunguska*. I was somewhere else when my brother self appeared here aboard *Kirov*. My brother was supposed to replace me! Time was planning to crown my brother king here. That bitch was trying to eliminate me completely, but something happened. I eluded her grasp and survived.

My God! She had it all figured out. *Kirov* was supposed to appear here, and then time filled Fedorov's head with the memory of everything we did in the first loop. He was supposed to steer the ship to a different course, which is exactly what he did. As for the world here, these altered states, that was history insofar as time was concerned. It all started rewriting everything back in 1908, and clearly, none of those other events when we fought the British

and Italians and Japanese ever happened here. So time is quite content to let this time line persist—in fact, that is exactly what she is planning! There is only one errant thread in her loom as she weaves all this together again—me! So what would I do in her place?

Karpov swallowed hard now, for he knew exactly what he would do. He would find any way possible to get rid of the aberration, and that is exactly what he was, an aberration.

So if I do this, use that control rod as Fedorov planned it, then I throw my fate to the wind again. I place myself at Time's mercy, and I have no reason whatsoever to believe that she will simply return me safely. Fedorov was talking about men simply vanishing—*I'll be the one to go next*. Time doesn't want me here—she wants my brother!

He gritted his teeth, inwardly shaking his head before it moved outwardly. Then he spoke aloud, to himself, to anyone who might hear it around him, and to time itself.

“To hell with that!”

“Sir?” Rodenko looked over at him.

“Mister Nikolin,” said Karpov firmly, ignoring Rodenko for the moment. “Signal the KA-40. Tell them the mission is aborted, and they are to return to the ship immediately. This is an emergency.”

* * *

They were up over the Sea of Okhotsk when the message came in, approaching the large desolate island of Bolshoy Shantar. Fedorov was in the co-pilot's chair, looking over some charts. Orlov was behind him in the second row of the forward cabin with Troyak to his left. A group of five Marines were in the rear compartment.

Orlov was there because Fedorov had personally asked him to join the mission. He had come across him earlier that day, moody and disgruntled, as always, but it was the pistol he was wearing in a side holster that caught his eye. Fedorov was smart enough to put two plus two together, and he knew he did not want to leave Orlov on the ship with Karpov—not with the mood that was on the Chief that day, and not with Orlov carrying that sidearm. The best thing, he thought, would be to get him off the ship. He could take Orlov with him, and then leave him on the Zeppelin when they made the rendezvous

with the *Irkutsk*. That was the ship they were meeting for the flight to Ilanskiy. Karpov's other self would meet them there.

The Pilot, Sherenski, saw the comm-link light up and toggled a switch. Nikolin's voice soon played over the overhead speaker.

"Mother One to Black Hawk, this is an emergency action message. Mission abort—I repeat. Mission abort. You are to return to the ship immediately—come back. Over."

The pilot looked at Fedorov, who had a puzzled expression on his face, but the light of understanding was slowly growing in his eyes. He raised a hand, indicating that Sherenski should take no action.

"I'll handle this," he said, reaching for the radio handset. "Black Hawk to Mother One. What is the problem? What emergency? Over."

"Black Hawk, Black Hawk—Mission abort. Repeat. Mission Abort. This is an order. Acknowledge on compliance. Over."

Fedorov had a frustrated look on his face. "Mother One—Nikolin—is the Admiral on the bridge? Put him on. I wish to speak with him directly."

Back on the bridge of *Kirov*, Karpov shook his head. He expected this, but there was no time to lose now. There was too much at stake.

"Rodenko," he said sharply. "Range to contact?"

"Sir? They are 314 kilometers out, approaching the island of Bolshoy Shantar."

"You have a telemetry link?"

"Yes sir, our link is good."

"Feed that to the CIC." Karpov spun about, his eyes finding Samsonov. The helo was slipping away. "Mister Samsonov. Key up an S-400. Target that helo and fire."

The Weapon's Chief gave him a blank look, hesitating, but not saying anything.

"Samsonov! Now! Now! This is imperative!"

"Aye sir!" Samsonov's hands were a blur. "Sounding missile warning—forward deck. S-400 40N6 keyed for action. Waiting on system..."

"Go Samsonov. Fire!"

"Sir, this is the long range ballistic trajectory missile. It was not on ready alert status and will need time to prep for action. It's the only missile we have with the range to get out that far."

"Damn!"

“Waiting on system... Waiting...” The time seemed eternal. “Sir, I have the ready light. Firing now.” The reflex was well honed, the order, the movement, the missile on its way in a billow of white smoke and yellow fire. The P-400 was so named because this version, the 40N6, had that range in kilometers, but it had a long way to go before its own internal systems would detect and lock on to the KA-40. Yet it was very fast, and it was going to get there very quickly, climbing to high altitude, and then tipping over to make a target approach from above, whereupon its active radar would switch to seek and destroy mode. It’s speed in that climb would reach Mach 7 at the apex, but as it tipped over and dove, it would accelerate to near Mach 12. At that speed it would be moving four kilometers per second.

The tension on the bridge was thick. Karpov was trying to kill the KA-40, with Fedorov, Orlov, Troyak and others aboard. The bridge crew was clearly shocked, some with eyes wide, not knowing what was happening or why. Samsonov had done his job, but his brow was wet with sweat, and he seemed clearly upset. Rodenko’s pulse was up. As senior officer on the ship now under Karpov, he felt he needed to speak up here.

“Admiral, sir, what are we doing?”

“Don’t worry, Rodenko. That goes for the rest of you. This is merely a warning shot. I need to reinforce my order. That mission must abort!”

“You mean you will self-destruct this missile? Sir, it will acquire in another minute. Time on target is 120 seconds!”

“I am well aware of that, Mister Rodenko. Calm yourself. Nikolin. Repeat my order. Tell them if they do not abort and assume a homeward bound heading immediately. They will be shot down.”

* * *

“Missile warning!” Sherenski looked at Fedorov, a mix of shock, surprise and fear in his eyes.

“That bastard!” said Orlov. “He’s trying to kill us all this time.”

If that were true, thought Fedorov, then it was sloppy, and not like anything Karpov would have premeditated. They were almost beyond missile range. If Karpov wanted them dead, he should have fired long ago, when his missiles would have a much better chance of hitting them. No, something had happened. Something was wrong. But what?

Fedorov thumbed the handset hard. “Karpov! What in God’s name are you doing? Explain this!”

All that came back was Nikolin again, repeating Karpov’s order.

“Should we turn?” Sherenski looked at him.

“They can’t be seeing us on the Fregat system this far out. They have to be relying on our transponder to fix our position. Turn it off, Shut down all radar and dive! Get down as low as you can. Take evasive maneuvers and be prepared to fire any ECM we have.”

Survival first.

There was a fast killer out there, and it had already acquired their position. There was another killer behind that weapon, and what could have possessed Karpov to fire on them rather than simply getting on the radio was now something that left Fedorov feeling very cold.

This is exactly what I did when we thought Orlov was escaping on the KA-226, thought Fedorov. We’re slipping away. Another few minutes and he won’t have anything that can hit us this far out. But what is he thinking? We might only have another minute left.

The KA-40 was a nice fat target, easy to see on radar, and it was not agile. The S-400 had already crossed half the distance to its target before the radars on the KA-40 even acquired it and sounded that missile warning. Now it was coming on like a runaway train, hurtling down from the apex of its long range flight path, its engine roaring in its wake, radar eyes searching... searching....

Chapter 32

The helo plummeted down, the missile lock warning barking, jangling raw nerves as instinct took hold and they all struggled for hand holds to keep from being thrown about. Sherenski, toggled three switches, pushed hard and sent the KA-40 into a steep dive, accelerating as he did to full military throttle on the engines.

They were right at the edge of the S-400s engagement envelope, and it was very nearly out of fuel. But down it came, its speed intense, like a bolt of lightning from the heavens above. All the chaff and flares were fired to try and spoof it, but it was not fooled. Its radar eyes and cold chip mind could clearly see the fluttering moth below, and it was locked on, relentless, boring in for the kill... until its fuel load was suddenly expended, flaming out in a last sputter of fire, and now it would be moving on momentum only, losing most of its power to maneuver.

Sherenski pulled hard on his controls, sending the helo wildly off in another direction. The missile saw the target move, tried to compensate, but the back end had moved off angle when the thrust cut out. The computer tried to compensate, making tiny adjustments to the fins to attempt a recovery, but it did not work. The missile began to tumble, and the internal program, sensing all fuel expended and loss of control, simply detonated the warhead with its self-destruct module. Even so, they heard the sharp clink of shrapnel strike one of the rotors. It had been that close.

Back aboard *Kirov*, Karpov had come over to Samsonov's station to personally take charge of the self-destruct command, and for that tense last thirty seconds, the Missile Chief sat stolidly in his chair, one eye watching the missile telemetry readings, the other stealing glances at the self destruct switch. When the telemetry cut out, a strong sign of successful detonation, he thought he heard Karpov swear under his breath. Then, looking at the Admiral's hand, he could see the command to destroy the missile was never sent.

Karpov cast a dark, narrow eyed glance his way, and the Chief looked away, saying nothing, and checking his telemetry reading again. "Missile destroyed," he said in a low voice.

Karpov closed the plastic cover over the missile abort switch, moving like a wraith to Rodenko's station. "You see," he breathed. "Nothing to get all bothered about. But I certainly got their attention. Yes?" He flashed a pale faced smile.

Now Nikolin spoke. "I have Captain Fedorov again sir. He is asking to speak with you."

"Send it to my ready room." Karpov strode off, closing the hatch behind him with a hard clank.

Rodenko looked at the other members of the bridge crew, who sat in silence, a bit stunned by what had just happened, but no one spoke. Then Grilikov came stomping up the main stairway to the bridge and loomed in the hatch, stepping inside, his big heavy-booted feet hard on the deck. He had been told by Karpov that whenever the alarm for combat of any sort was heard on the ship, he was to drop anything he was doing and get to the bridge at once. The silence among the bridge crew deepened.

Inside his ready room Karpov was struggling with his own inner anger. I was stupid just now, he chided himself. That was a goddamned knee jerk reaction on my part, something my brother self might have done, impulsive, wasteful and just plain stupid. Yes, I wasted a good missile just now, and all I did was put Fedorov on his guard. There's another way to handle this. Where can they go? That helo has limited fuel, and it must either make its rendezvous with *Irkutsk*, return to the ship, or simply land somewhere. Any of those alternatives would have ended this scenario. The missile wasn't necessary.

He reached for the handset, and thumbed it to speak. "Karpov here. Get the wax out of your ears, Fedorov. You've been ordered to return to the ship immediately. This mission is aborted."

"What in the name of heaven is going on, Karpov? Why the missile? We took damage just now, and you could have killed us!"

"That was just a little theatrics to get your attention and make it stick. Now turn that helo around and get back here. We certainly can't discuss this on the radio, encrypted or not."

"But we've so little time," said Fedorov. "If I don't act before the 30th of September—"

"Bullshit, Fedorov. Understand? Bullshit! Turn that helo and get back here. I'll explain everything when you arrive."

Fedorov's pulse was up, a heat on him even in the cold Siberian air. That missile had been very close. The outer limit of its engagement envelope was variable, and it had failed to reach them, but just barely. What could have possibly compelled Karpov to make this call? Didn't he understand what was at stake here? The Admiral's voice came back, a little breathless, as though he had been struggling to control himself, an enforced composure evident in his tone, though Fedorov could perceive the tension in every word he spoke.

"Look Fedorov, where else can you go? You'll run out a fuel yourself soon, and have to land somewhere in Siberia—*my* Siberia, I might add. Make your rendezvous with the *Irkutsk* and I'll have you arrested then and there. So just be smart now and turn back while you can. There's more to this than we contemplated—very much more."

He's afraid, thought Fedorov. He's afraid of something, but he can't come right out and say it. How can I convince him that this mission is imperative. "Admiral," he said. "If we abort now, we may not have time to get back and complete the mission."

"There isn't going to *be* any mission!" The anger was back.

"But you know what's at stake. We went over everything, for hours and hours."

"Yes, I know what's at stake—but you don't, Fedorov. Now stop arguing and obey orders!"

Fedorov thought quickly. He needed time, so he decided to allay the Admiral's fears, whatever they were, and tell him what he wanted to hear. "Very well, Admiral. We will return to the ship as ordered. I just hope to God you know what you're doing here. Fedorov out."

"Get up to altitude so Rodenko can see you," said Karpov back. "I can promise you safe passage home. Then I'll explain everything. Karpov out."

"Turn now and climb sir?" Sherenski gave Fedorov a wide-eyed look.

"And give that bastard another shot at us?" said Orlov. "*Sookin Sym!* He'll kill us, Fedorov. Don't believe a word he says. We should take the helo and get as far away from here as we can."

Fedorov gritted his teeth. "Pilot, put us back on course for the *Irkutsk* rendezvous."

"Sir? You will not obey the Admiral's order?"

"Damn right he won't obey the bloody Admiral's order," Orlov growled.

"Just turn and make that rendezvous," said Fedorov, and keep us low.

Keep the transponder off, and disengage the radio as well. I can't have them tracking us that way, but first... I need to buy us some time." He thumbed the send switch.

"Black Hawk to Mother, that missile did more damage than we thought. We have a fuel leak and I've determined we cannot make the ship." He reached over, and cranked the frequency modulator, and flipped a switch for ECM jamming as well, all while he continued sending. "Come in, *Kirov*, we cannot read your link.... Breaking up..." Then he switched the radio set off.

Aboard *Kirov*, Nikolin received the message, but it didn't sound anything like genuine interference to his trained ear. To make certain, he checked his data log on the frequency integrity, and looking that over he was immediately convinced that they had tried to spoof radio failure on the other end. It was deliberate.

He swallowed, thinking, his eyes moving this way and that. Then he reported. "Sir, that last communication was cut off. Their radio sounded like it was fried. I've lost the com link."

Fedorov had at least one collaborator there in Nikolin. But would he now have the time he needed to carry out his plan? He looked around the cabin, realizing he was going to ask a great deal of all these men. His eyes met Troyak's.

"Sergeant," he said quietly. "You and I need to have a word or two. We're going to make that rendezvous with the Siberian airship, and Karpov is likely to learn we aren't returning to the ship soon. In that event, he will certainly contact the *Irkutsk*, so when we get there, we'll likely face a hostile reception. I know I'm asking you to be complicit in what is really my decision to disobey Karpov's orders now. Believe me, I have an urgent reason to do so, and very little time. I'm asking you and your men to support me now. Can I rely on you."

Troyak thought for a moment. He had received no orders of any kind from Karpov. He was asked to accompany this sortie by the ship's first officer, and it was not his business to intervene and tell the *Starpom* what he should or should not do. If Fedorov was bucking Karpov here, that would be business between him and the Admiral.

"Sir," he said quietly. "As I have no other orders, your word remains final here unless I hear otherwise."

"Good enough," said Fedorov. "I will take full responsibility, rest

assured, but this is the situation we may soon be facing...”

* * *

Miles to the east, the Airship *Irkutsk* was hovering at the rendezvous point, and her Captain was chewing on the orders he had just received, the taste bitter in his mouth. Symenko was once the senior officer aboard *Alexandra*, a scout ship in Volkov’s Orenburg Fleet. He had also been a Squadron Commandant in Volkov’s Eastern Airship Division, but no longer. He had turned, angry when he felt he had been sent on a mission to Ilanskiy just so Volkov could get rid of him. He had once been promised the Governorate of Omsk, but when Volkov signed his accord with the Siberians ceding that city back, Symenko became a nuisance. His trouble with Volkov went back years before that. He had opposed him when Denikin was still alive in the White Movement, and he knew Volkov had a long memory. The General Secretary had used him to deliver a message to Karpov, intending it to be his last service in the Orenburg fleet.

A surly man, ill tempered by nature, Symenko was even more irascible when he realized he had been thrown to the wolves. Karpov had interrogated him, extracting as much information as possible, and then made a startling offer.

“So you’re just the messenger, is it Symenko? You want to claim diplomatic immunity and have me kiss your backside and send you merrily on your way? I should drag your ass into that spy basket and cut the damn thing loose. That would be a nice long ride to hell, right Symenko? We are at 4500 meters up here. But before I do that, let me test what you have said. You tell me Volkov has betrayed you as well? Then join me.”

“What?”

“Don’t look so stupid. If it is true that Volkov considers you expendable and sends you into the bear’s den with that pouch, then how eager can you be to fight for him now?”

A very good point, thought Symenko, particularly when the other man was holding a gun to your head. He thought quickly. Join him? Why not? It was either that or a bullet to the head. He would cover his bet for a while, feed Karpov any information that seemed suitable, and secretly plan to get back to his ship and contact Petrov on the *Oskemen*. But Karpov got to him

first, blowing *Oskemen* and Petrov to hell. Symenko stewed in the Brig aboard Karpov's ship, and days later, the Siberian repeated his offer. Knowing he could never go back to Orenburg and survive, Symenko had agreed to serve the Siberians.

He was given secondary roles at first, *Starpom* in one of Karpov's cruisers, but he swallowed his pride, knuckled down and proved himself reliable. Then again to his surprise, Karpov had summoned him to his big new airship, the *Tunguska*, and given him his first real command—the *Irkutsk*. It was a fine ship, former flagship of the Eastern Siberian Division, 180,000 cubic meter lift, with ten 76ers and six more 105s. That was a choice command, much better than anything he had ever had under his boots with Volkov's fleet, and he was very appreciative. It had gone a long way in tamping down his temper, but it turned out that *Irkutsk* was mostly on overwatch and recon duty over Lake Baikal. He would spend his time peering through binoculars at the Japanese outposts on the other side of that great barrier lake, and duly noting any changes in his reports to Karpov.

Then, out of the blue, comes this order to proceed to the Tokko Lake, about 200 miles inland from the Sea of Okhotsk. He was to rendezvous with an aircraft there, take on passengers, and ferry them another 1300 miles west to Ilanskiy. That alone was surprising, he thought. Who could these passengers be? Then, when he got this last communication from Karpov, his blood ran cold. He was ordered to take the passengers aboard, and hold them in protective custody. Then fly immediately to his home city, Irkutsk.

What was going on here, he wondered? Who were these passengers, and what had happened in the last hours to suddenly change the reception he was ordered to make for them. One minute I'm going to Ilanskiy, the next it's back to Irkutsk. Karpov is up to something, he knew, and it boded nothing good.

"Captain," said his Radarman Chunskiy. "We have a signal, low and slow. I make it about 2000 meters and approaching the lake on the expected heading."

The helo would land on the banks of this isolated lake, with nary a soul to ever see what would happen there. This has been very hush, hush, thought Symenko. And it's no wonder—Ilanskiy. That place has been a witches brew for years. It's what first got me into this stew here, and something tells me there's trouble ahead. Take these passengers into custody, is it. Very well.

“Make ready to rendezvous as planned,” he ordered. “Sergeant of the Marines, I’ll want the bin ready to be lowered smartly on my command. Go yourself, and with three good men. The passengers are to be disarmed and brought directly to my stateroom. If you get any trouble, ring the bridge on the field phone. Bridge gondola gunners will stand to, and cover that aircraft when it lands—and god help them here.” He could see no suitable airfield, and wondered just how a plane could ever land here. That was a detail he had been told not to worry about, but now these passengers were details that would most likely be trouble for him.

Karpov... That was all that need be said about this matter. The bloody Admiral was up to something again, plain and simple. Only what was all this about?

Chapter 33

When Symenko saw the aircraft, he was amazed. It had no wings to speak of, and two big rotors above the bulbous main airframe. It made a loud chopping sound as it approached, and he realized this must be one of those helicopters that had been spoken up by airmen of the fleet these last months. It hovered like an angry, noisome bee, and then made a perfect soft landing on a spit of turf extending out into the eastern shore of Lake Tokko.

Shaking his head, he maneuvered *Irkutsk* overhead, his recoilless rifles covering the strange craft below as ordered. Then they lowered the basket, a square metal cargo lifter, with Sergeant Klykov and three other armed Marines.

Down in the KA-40, Fedorov was watching the basket lower, his pulse up. They could see the heads of four men in the basket, peering down at them from above as it lowered. He had told Troyak that they would likely meet with trouble here. "These men will want to apprehend us," he said, "but I cannot allow that to happen. I will want you and your Marines to handle the situation, but without bloodshed. Can you do that?"

Troyak simply nodded, asking no questions, and then looking over at Zykov, who nodded back. Then Fedorov explained what he was going to do.

"The KA-40 doesn't have the range to get me to Ilanskiy," he said. "This was as far inland as we could go, and Lake Tokko here was an easy landmark for this rendezvous. But now I need that airship."

"Sir?" Troyak looked up at the massive shape in the sky, growing larger with each moment as it descended, its shadow deepening on the ground around them.

"I want to take that airship. Can you disarm any men they send down in that basket?"

Troyak nodded.

"Good..." Fedorov was thinking all this through on the fly. He stared up. "Those guns look somewhat threatening. If we take action down here, those gunners will certainly see it. So I want you and your men to stow your weapons in that duffel bag. We'll let them take us up to the airship. Then, on my signal, I want you and the Marines to take the situation in hand. Is that

possible?”

“I understand sir. We’ll handle it.”

“And we can’t have anyone at the receiving end sending a warning to their bridge. So if you can overpower those men, disarm them, we can then have your men suit up in their uniforms. Then we find our way to the bridge, but make it look like you are escorting me and Orlov there as prisoners. I know this is chancy, but it’s the only thing I can think of now.”

“Damn,” said Orlov with a smile. “You’ve got some balls Fedorov. *Sookin Sym!*”

That was what they did, and it was an almost comical moment when Sergeant Klykov off the *Irkutsk* found himself staring at the likes of these tough strange men, off that equally strange aircraft. One looked to be a Siberian, rough hewn, all muscle, and with an aspect that was so threatening that Klykov instinctively stepped back when he drew close, reaching for his pistol. But the big man simply smiled, and all the others seemed to be cooperating. So they herded everyone into the cargo basket, including three duffel bags, which he checked, seeing it was all the weapons these men must have had with them. He reached for the crank on the field phone, one eye still on Troyak, who stood there, brawny arms folded over his broad chest. Orlov was chewing on something, eyeing Klykov and his men with unfriendly glances.

“The party has surrendered their weapons and we are ready to come up,” said Klykov. Seconds later the basket creaked and swayed as it slowly lifted off the ground. As for Sherenski and one other crewmen, they kept their heads down, remaining unseen in the KA-40 as Fedorov had ordered, and thankfully, this Marine Sergeant had no compulsion to search the helo.

Up they went, and unexpectedly, Troyak began speaking to the Sergeant in a Siberian dialect. “You are a Khabarovski,” he said. “I can see it in the cut of your chin. Where are you from?”

“Chumikan on the coast,” said Krykov. “And you are from this region as well?”

“Chiukchi Province. Good fishing at Chumikan. I used to fish the mouth of the Uda River as a boy there.”

Krykov gave him a nod and wan smile. The basket was up, and Troyak looked over the landing area, seeing a hatch or opening above in the outer shell of the airship, and a ladder up. Two other men off *Irkutsk* secured the

basket and then Troyak spoke again in the same dialect.

“Sergeant,” he said. “May I have your pistol, please?”

“What?”

“No questions. Just your pistol, and if your men will hand over their rifles, then we can all get up that ladder and warm up.”

“Just a moment here,” Krykov’s eyes narrowed, and he reached for his sidearm, which was then snatched so quickly by Troyak’s sudden move that Krykov looked down at his hand, stunned to see it empty. The other men started to brandish their rifles, but that got them nowhere. Troyak’s Marines just stared them down, cold merciless stares from the Black Death.

“You might want to chamber a round before you point that at someone,” said Troyak, snatching the first rifle away as Zykov suddenly produced a pistol and leveled it at their faces.

“And you might take the time to search a man you plan to take as a prisoner,” said Zykov with a cold smile.

“Now then,” said Troyak. “We will also require your uniforms....”

* * *

“What’s taking them so long to get forward?” said Symenko, still on the bridge of the *Irkutsk*. “Alright, Helmsman, take us up to 2000 meters, and set course for home. Ahead two thirds when you reach elevation. I’ll be in my stateroom above,” he finished.

He took the ladder up, entering the vast interior of the airship, and then saw a clump of men on the main central walkway along the spine of the ship, coming forward from the tail section where the cargo basket had been lowered. He could see the uniforms of his Marines, and two other men being herded along. In the darkness he could not get a head count, and he just growled over his shoulder.

“You men follow me to the stateroom, and step lively.”

That was exactly what Troyak and the others did, with himself, Zykov, Chenko and Durbin all decked out in the other men’s uniforms, the last carrying their own digs in a small duffel bag, along with their weapons. At the moment, they simply used the rifles they had taken from Krykov’s men to look as authentic as possible to anyone who might have seen them. Zykov looked up into the massive overhead interior of the airship, impressed by the

huge airbags, and seeing men on the riggings above, some on ladders, others walking on horizontal metal walkways between them.

They reached the door to the Captain's stateroom, seeing Symenko tramp in without so much as a casual glance behind him. He walked straight to the far wall, flipped a switch to start a small heater, and then slowly began pulling off his gloves, his back still turned to the party as he warmed his hands.

"I'll never get used to this cold out here," he muttered. "Alright Sergeant Krykov. Make your report."

"The Sergeant is otherwise disposed," said Fedorov, which prompted Symenko to turn, a startled look on his face. He saw the group of strangers, the tough looking men in ill fitting uniforms, and tumblers clicked in his mind, unlocking his pent up anger.

"God almighty, what the hell is this about?" He looked them over, his suspicions growing. "If that bastard Karpov has double crossed me again... Where are my men?"

"Safe in that cargo basket, though I daresay they might need some blankets. You are Captain of this ship?"

"Damn right I'm the Captain, but who the hell are you. Karpov sent you to do this? Well, he might have saved himself the trouble if he wanted me relieved. Damn that man—yes, I'll say it right here to your faces. Who the hell are you?"

He could see that Fedorov clearly wore a naval uniform, as did the big man behind him. As for Fedorov, his mind was lightning quick. "Captain, I'm sorry to say that I will be relieving you—at least for the time being. But I'll need your cooperation."

"Cooperation?"

"Correct. I need to get to Ilanskiy, and as quickly as possible. Isn't that where you were bound from here?"

"We're making for Irkutsk, on orders from his highness."

"I'm countermanding those orders?"

"You? Well I can't say Karpov will take a liking to that."

"Nor I, but it's imperative that I get to Ilanskiy."

"Karpov's there—or at least I'm told he will be. I hope you're prepared to deal with that when you get there. Was this his doing? To pull me about by the nose like this, and then relieve me? I never thought the bastard really

trusted me. Once a Volkov man, always a Volkov man, or so I've heard him mutter at times. I should have known better when he gave me this ship. He's pulled the same thing that Volkov did, just using me for his devices and then, here you come, in that nice new uniform, to take it all away."

"Captain," said Fedorov. "I have no designs on making a career in the Siberian airship fleet, nor did I really come here to relieve you. I am Captain Anton Fedorov, off the battlecruiser *Kirov*, presently operating off Sakhalin Island. I just need your ship to get to Ilanskiy."

"Battlecruiser *Kirov*—that's the ship we've heard all the rumors about. Men say it has the Japanese all riled up. I've had the watch over Lake Baikal for three months, and they've doubled down on their troop deployments there, that's for sure. So you need my ship? Why not fly off in that contraption you came in on?"

"It hasn't got the range. We've already come all this way from the Sea of Okhotsk, and can go no further. So I need this airship, but I'll want your cooperation in managing it, and your crew. I can navigate, but I'm no airship Captain, rest assured. I don't want your job."

"Mother of God," said Symenko, a light of understanding in his eyes now. "You've gone and pulled a fast one on his lordship, is that so? It's true that he wants the lot of you rounded up and hauled off to Irkutsk, isn't it."

"Is that where he wanted us? It doesn't surprise me, but I have another mission, and it simply won't wait. Now... I'll need this airship turned around and headed to Ilanskiy—right now. Will you give the order on that telephone to the bridge? If not, I'll have to send Sergeant Troyak and Mister Orlov here to see that it gets done, and that could get... uncomfortable. You get me to Ilanskiy, and this ship is yours to do whatever you please, but now please. Give that order." He gestured to the telephone."

"He says please, does he? No pistol at my head, is it? I rather like your style, Captain. Why are you so hot and bothered to get to Ilanskiy, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Later. I'll explain everything on the way there." He waited.

"You realize you'll meet his Lordship there, and aboard that bloody fleet flagship of his—*Tunguska*."

"I'm well aware of that."

"And if he doesn't take a fancy to my docking on the tower?"

"I'll deal with that later. For now, Captain, if you please?"

Symenko gave him a narrow eyed smile. "You starting your own private war with Karpov out here? Good luck, Captain. Alright. I'll give the order, so long as you have one of those Marines point a rifle my way. I'll need to say it was done under duress, you understand. Because Karpov will want to see me about what happens here, won't he, and I can't very well just say I ferried you out here because you asked me so nicely."

Symenko reached for the telephone and rang up the bridge. "Helmsman, this is the Captain. Come about and resume our original plotted course to Kansk. 3000 meters, and ahead full."

* * *

Over 1800 kilometers to the west at Novosibirsk, Vladimir Karpov was clearly not happy. He had just received an emergency action message from his elder brother aboard *Kirov*. The planned rendezvous at Ilanskiy was cancelled. Instead he was to take *Tunguska* southeast to Irkutsk, but not until he could post a strong airship patrol over Ilanskiy. It had come in on the radio, and his brother had explained the problem.

"I'm still at Novosibirsk," he said to the Siberian. "We were going to leave for Ilanskiy at 18:00 tomorrow."

"Well, leave now," his brother self insisted. "*It's Fedorov. You were right, brother. We can't trust that bastard.*"

"Fedorov? What has he done this time?"

"*He's up to his old tricks again.*" The Siberian explained what had happened, and what he had ordered Symenko on the *Irkutsk* to do. "*No one goes down that stairway at Ilanskiy. Understand? And we'll need a strong airship patrol there.*"

"That business with *Angara* got your dander up?" said the younger self. "Did you get my report on the wreckage? There was clear evidence they were hit with large caliber rounds."

"Yes, yes, we can go over that later. For now, Ilanskiy must be adequately garrisoned against any similar incursion, and I want you to round up Fedorov and the others."

"The others?"

"Orlov is with him, and Troyak with four Marines."

"I see... That won't be easy, brother. Troyak could be a problem."

"Don't worry about it, they are all already under custody on the *Irkutsk*."

Just get over there, and bring the whole lot to our new base at Okha on Sakhalin island. We'll talk privately there, and I'll fill you in on all the details."

"Alright, but I'll need to take on more fuel. It's 1400 kilometers to Irkutsk from here, but I can leave in two hours."

"And Ilanskiy?"

"I have *Riga* and *Narva* with me. I'll send them both."

So even as Fedorov sped west towards Ilanskiy, *Tunguska* would be heading the opposite direction towards Irkutsk. *Narva* and *Riga* were much closer to Ilanskiy at Novosibirsk, but they were both in the process of replenishing, and planned to leave in two hours. It was going to take Fedorov just under 18 hours to reach Ilanskiy, and even with their delayed departure, those two airships would reach their defensive posting in just eight hours.

Miles to the north, another airship drifted through the grey mist over a long winding river. Hauptmann Karl Linz was studying his charts as he peered at the river below. They had been following the Yenisei for some time, waiting for it to branch off to the east in the Angara. If they continued south, it would take them to Krasnoyarsk, and only about 120 kilometers west of Kansk. But that route was always closely watched by flights of roving aircraft from the fields near Krasnoyarsk. Taking the Angara tributary would see them moving almost due east, about 230 to 250 kilometers north of Kansk. A good compass was all he needed to navigate south, and they had scouted the route earlier.

He was following charts that had been provided to him by Otto Kluge, the Kapitän of *Fafnir*, for he was commander of her sister ship, *Fraenir*, out on its maiden voyage.

Kluge got an airship out here on his first sortie, he thought. Maybe I'll get lucky too. His chart says to follow this river and look for a knob like bend at the small village of Pinchuga. That's where I make my turn. Perhaps we'll sneak into Ilanskiy and give them a nasty little surprise.

What he did not know at that moment, was that a pair of good fighting battleships were already en route to Ilanskiy on Karpov's orders, and when he got there the reception was likely to be none too cordial, particularly after the loss of the *Angara*. Even so, the presence of this massive new German airship was going to factor heavily in what was now to happen. Karpov's bombing run over Germany would have repercussions he could have never imagined

when he first ordered the bombs to fall.

As for Fedorov, he realized that he would likely meet opposition at Ilanskiy, both in the air and on the ground. So he had no intention of trying to take the airship in close to the town. He would leave it to Symenko, and take to the ground east of Ilanskiy, along the same route they had once planned for their raid. There was a full Siberian Division at Ilanskiy now, and that became his next problem. He would now be trying to do what Ivan Volkov, and all his legions and airships had failed to do over a long year of struggle. But they had slipped in once before, and with Troyak, they would try once again. Everything depended on them doing so successfully, or so he believed, even though his nemesis, Karpov, saw things in an entirely different light.

Yes, they would try once again, and he had a plan....

Even as he thought that, other men were thinking too, and asking questions, serious men, and very far away. He would never hear their voices; never know what they would say, but his life would be profoundly affected by what they concluded. For they, too, had plans of their own—plans that could put an end to the long debate and mounting tension between Fedorov and Karpov, but in a way neither of them would ever expect.

Part XII

The Wolf

“To run with the wolf was to run in the shadows, the dark ray of life, survival and instinct. A fierceness that was both proud and lonely...”

— O.R. Melling

Chapter 34

“You say you detected a British Submarine? Finding such a submarine is not remarkable, but firing at it with a Special Warhead—that is another matter. I suppose that is wartime doctrine, but given the circumstances, it was most unwise. Strange that we have had no reports on any of this, and it is certainly something the British would know about if you did this. Yet they haven’t made even the barest whisper of a protest. So this is all very confusing.”

Gromyko shifted uncomfortably, waiting. The questions had been routine at first, but now they were getting to matters that were rather delicate. In fact, he had already said too much here. How much more should he reveal? What could he really say to these men—that he had been using a charmed control rod in his reactor and slipping about through time? ...that he saw the world destroyed in a future that was even now right at the edge of events grabbing headlines all across the globe? ...that he fled from that nightmare into the midst of yet another war, the Great Patriotic war, where he was bravely taking the fight to Russia’s great nemesis, Germany... until a British submarine intervened.

This was madness. It barely made sense to him at the moment, and he had lived through it all, hour by hour. Should he start over, from the very beginning? Should he tell them how he was summoned to the Sea of Okhotsk, and how the Admiral came aboard to brief him on a very secret mission? His remarks about that British sub had given up the game. Now they will have to know all the rest, and they could simply go mad right along with him.

Misery loves company.

His presence there was yet another mystery—or was it? Mister Garin, his Chief Engineer, had reported that Rod-25 was showing signs of physical damage. They had to retract it into a rad-safe container for further examination and analysis before attempting to use it again. So no, it was not Rod-25 that was the culprit this time. They had blown a hole right through time with one of their own torpedoes! It had happened in the heat of that last

engagement with the German fleet in the Atlantic, and he was still trying to understand what had actually occurred there.

One minute they were feasting on the German Navy, the next minute his Sonarman Chernov was hearing a modern day British sub in the water, and Spearfish torpedoes followed soon after that report. He had reacted on pure reflex, an instinct born of long hours at sea in the heat of combat. That part was still clear in his mind:

“Launch noisemaker sled number one. Right rudder fifteen, down bubble fifteen! Rig for emergency silent running!” His own voice had been strident but sharp and firm. *Kazan* maneuvered like a shadow, its engines suddenly stilled, a great dark whale rolling over and slowly diving into the depths of the sea. At the same time, a special port on the nose of the ship launched a screw-driven sled, which trundled forward on the sub’s original course, leaving a trail of sound behind it designed to imitate the sub’s normal operating acoustic signature. The Matador twirled his cape, spinning deftly away from a threat he presumed was imminent—pure reflex.

He never had time to consider how that threat could possibly be there. That long honed instinct knew one thing: if Chernov was correct, and he was hearing a British *Astute* Class sub, then they most certainly heard *Kazan* as well. Those Spearfish torpedoes in the water had put the final word in on that argument. Nothing could be more real than a weapon intending the death of your ship—the death of every man aboard—your death.

“How far out are they?” He had asked Chernov.

“Quite a ways, sir. Sound Track has them at an estimated 30 klicks.”

They would be difficult to fool with the noise sled, he thought. We might get one to take the bait, but the other? The calculus of war was running through his mind in those few brief seconds. That was all the time he had to keep death at bay. Think! React! He remembered it all so very well....

What if I ran now? We’ve got about ten more minutes until those fish get close. They’re moving at 150kph! If I go all ahead full at 65kph now, I could run another twenty kilometers. That would put those fish right out near their maximum range, and well beyond their wire guided segment when they catch me....

“Secure silent running!” he said suddenly. “All ahead full battle speed!”

Kazan lurched ahead, her powerful engines straining. If Chernov’s read on the firing range was correct, things would be very close. The entire

situation had now spun off in a wild twisted gyre of chaos. One minute it was WWII he was fighting, the next it was WWIII. It was the same shock that had just come to *Kirov* in the Pacific, though Gromyko knew nothing whatsoever of Karpov's duel with *Takami*. Just the same, for him two wars were underway at the same time. He was either going to be dead in the next ten minutes, or someone else was. It came down to that single glaring choice.

The best defense was always a good offense, he knew. Those bastards are out there now, grinning at the other end of that fiber optic wire, and as long as that silent devil of a sub is out there, my life will not be worth five rubles. That sub is just too quiet. It's a miracle Chernov heard the damn thing. If they don't get me today, they'll certainly try again tomorrow. He knew what he would do if this were 2021. Time to get serious...

"Load tube number one," he said, his voice hard and low. "Special warhead. Mister Belanov," he turned to his *Starpom*, "stand ready to initiate permissions sequencing."

He reached for the Hammer of God....

He had fired his Type 65 torpedo, back along the axis of the undersea enemy attack. Soon, he thought, the sea will erupt with Neptune's wrath.

It sounded like a great kettle being struck when it happened. Nearly a hundred meters deep, the 20 kiloton warhead went off with a resonant boom, the immense sphere of expanding gas and vaporized seawater creating a tremendous shock wave in all directions. The enemy *Spearfish* careened wildly off course, its sensitive sonar pummeled with the wrenching sound, dumbstruck.

Gromyko knew his torpedo would take too long to reach the enemy sub, but he only needed to get close. The shock of the warhead would expand out several kilometers, and all he needed was to get some of that awful explosive force close to his enemy to hurt this sub.

He didn't really know what happened, but they could hear it. There came a rending sound, so deep and terrible that every man on the boat covered their ears, their faces taut with pain. It was a sound from another place, the moaning agony of eternity, long and distended, the meridians of infinity being wrenched and twisted until they broke.

The fissure opened, and *Ambush* plowed right into the expanding wave of shimmering phosphorescent plasma. It was as if the edge of that fire was the maw of some great wrathful sea demon, opening to consume the submarine.

Ambush's rounded nose vanished at the glimmering edge, soon followed by the long, bulbous body of the vessel, which plunged right on through a deep rupture in time, rent open by the violence of the explosion.

Then all was silent....

They had come to their senses, the tension slowly winding down, the boat slowly regaining its normal operations. But they were no longer there in the strange dream they had been sailing through—not with Fedorov, and Volsky, and all of WWII. In time he sent an encrypted message, hoping to make contact with *Kirov* again, but someone else answered, and when they did, Gromyko realized his strange ride on the sliding boards of time was not yet over. It was Severomorsk! They were no longer there in the old war, but home again, in the year 2021.

The warhead, he thought, that had to be the cause. That explosion must have opened a hole in time. It's the only thing that can account for my presence here, for I must have sailed right on through that hole. One minute it was 1941, the next minute 80 years had passed and *Kazan* was adrift in the eerie quiet of an empty sea, and it was 2021.

He thought that world was long gone. After they had first shifted out, Gromyko had reached some unseen future, where the world he had come from was utterly destroyed, burned black to char, smashed by the final war they were facing when they first slipped away with Admiral Volsky. Yet there he stood, with a message in hand from Severomorsk, and one that was very insistent. *Kazan* was ordered home at once, and so there he was, sitting in front of the naval review board, answering questions put to him by these three blind mice.

He was trying to figure out how he might explain this whole incredible odyssey to these three men in drab grey suits and heavy overcoats, each one marked with the insignia of the Naval Intelligence arm of the Navy. A nice little lynching party these three would make, he thought.

"I am trying to understand this," said the first. "You say you fired this warhead, and then this British submarine simply disappeared?"

"That is correct."

"Then it was destroyed by your torpedo?"

"Possibly. All I know was that we had no further contacts. In time I ran the boat shallow to send out a signal." Never mind that it was meant for Fedorov and Volsky, he thought to himself. But imagine my surprise when I

get orders from Severomorsk in reply!

“Yes... We heard your signal. In fact, it was long overdue, and the navy was beginning to wonder what had happened to you, Captain Gromyko. Now you appear with this report of an incident with a British submarine, yet the British will not confirm your story, not even on the most discrete back channels where truth is sometimes told when it matters. One would think that the detonation of a 20 kiloton nuclear warhead might matter, particularly in light of the news today in the Pacific.”

The man stared at Gromyko, waiting, but before the Captain could say anything more, another man walked slowly through a door behind the dais where the three mice sat in judgment. He was wearing a black wool coat and Gabardine hat.

“That will be all, gentlemen,” he said matter of factly. “I will conclude this interview personally.”

The three men turned, seeing the man, and then immediately deferred, each one slowly standing, the wooden legs of their chairs skidding loudly on the plain tiled floor. They tramped slowly off stage, exiting through the same door that the fourth man had come through, and Gromyko watched, with just the hint of recollection, as the newcomer produced a pipe from his trench coat pocket, and slowly lit it with a silver lighter. He suddenly knew who this was!

“Captain,” the man said quietly. “Welcome home. I have only just arrived here myself, though I must say the ride was quite strange.”

“Director Kamenski?”

“One and the same, at least I hope as much.”

“You say you have only just arrived? Then *Kirov* has returned as well? The ship is safely home?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Gromyko looked at him, not understanding. “But sir, you were quartered there, were you not?”

“I was.... How to describe this. Let’s just say that report you were filing with the Naval Review Board had something to do with it. A nice little 20 kiloton warhead has a way of shaking the cups in the cupboard. Well I was one of the cups. I don’t suppose I could explain it to you, other than to say you are here, along with your submarine, and I am here as well. You moved—I moved, and here we are.”

“But sir, you were in the Atlantic? I sailed here with *Kazan*. How did you get here?”

“I would be very interested to know that,” said Kamenski. “I suppose, I landed here because this is where I was—in this time, on this day, in 2021. Yes, I was aboard *Kirov*, in my quarters as you say, and I could feel that things were starting to slip again. I left Mister Fedorov a little present on the nightstand, and the next thing I know I was sitting behind my desk in Moscow, but with a head full of new memories. I think if I had given that little gift away earlier, I might not remember anything of your remarkable mission with Admiral Volsky and Fedorov, but as it stands, you need not worry about explaining any of that to me. It’s all crystal clear.” The Director tapped a finger on the rim of his hat, then removed it, and sat down at the desk.

“Severomorsk called me concerning this hearing, so I thought I had better see to the matter of your sudden reappearance. Let’s not be formal. Please join me here at the desk.”

Gromyko was quite confused, but he came forward and took a seat with Kamenski at the table. How this man could be here, while *Kirov* remained elsewhere, still escaped him, but seeing was believing.

“So,” Kamenski began. “That was quite an engagement—*Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* out after the *Rodney*, the *Graf Zeppelin* burning on the sea, torpedoes flying everywhere, I suppose. Very dramatic. Whatever possessed you into thinking a 20 kiloton warhead was the weapon of choice?”

“Reflex. That’s how we would fight today. You either get the other fellow, or he gets you. I wasn’t going to take any chances, the fate of the *Ambush* aside.”

“Ah yes, that was the British submarine. Well, you may be surprised to know that it arrived here safe and sound as well. Those naval inquisitors may not have known about it, but Directors of intelligence tend to know a good deal more.” He smiled.

“I thought you were retired, sir.”

“So did I... at least I seem to remember I was. But not here—not now. I’m not even Deputy Director here—they’ve kicked me right on up to the top.”

“But you say you remember the mission, everything we set out to do—1908, the action off Oki Island, all that bouncing about in time, the

rendezvous with *Kirov*, and all the fighting in the Mediterranean and Atlantic.”

“Chapter and verse. And yet, I have been here all along, while some other version of me was out riding about on your submarine and kibitzing with Mister Fedorov aboard *Kirov*. Yes, I’ve just been minding my affairs in Moscow. But this old head of mind suddenly filled up like a good glass of wine, and... I was understandably interested to learn that your submarine had returned. It’s happened to me before, though it may not happen again now that I’ve passed on my little gift to Mister Fedorov.”

“This is very confusing.” Gromyko scratched his head.

“It certainly is. Let me put it to you this way. That nice fat torpedo of yours didn’t kill the *Ambush*, but it poked a nice fat hole in the spacetime continuum. We’ve discussed all this before. Yes? Well, I suspect that British submarine found its way back to 1941 the same way you showed it the door. Infinity doesn’t like it when you disturb its long sleep. That’s what a nuke is—a brash knock on infinity’s door, and I’m afraid all too many will be thrown about in this next fight. Things are getting very tense here. I have it on good authority that we will be at war in a week... perhaps nine days at best. We’ve been here before, and it will happen again. In fact this will be the third time I’ll live through it all—assuming I do live it through.”

“The war?” said Gromyko. “It was just about to start the day we left for our mission.”

“Yes, and what a mission it was. Karpov took the ship out as the flagship of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet. He thumbed his nose at the American 7th Fleet, and then that Demon volcano ended their argument. You and I know what happened after that. Well, don’t be surprised, Mister Gromyko, to find all that mucking about in the 20th century has had some effect on things here in the 21st! That was the idea, you see, to try and stop this war here from taking place. But a lot of breadcrumbs have already fallen through the cracks in the table—Karpov, *Kirov*, Kinlan, *Kazan*. Not to mention Ivan Volkov, and some we may not even know about yet. Well, it has to stop, because if we don’t do something about it, and quickly, time is going to start making some very hard choices.”

Gromyko shrugged.

“Well now,” said Kamenski. “Let me explain...”

Chapter 35

“**You** may not have known much about it, but some very strange things were happening aboard *Kirov* before you took that shot at a British submarine. Yes, very strange things. That ship and crew were all facing a real judgment, not just a few uncomfortable questions from nosy navy inquisitors. They were facing annihilation, because the day and time of their first arrival in the past was drawing ever nearer, and it was casting a very deep shadow. Men began to go missing on that ship, and I’m afraid I was probably one of them. My disappearance must have given Mister Fedorov quite a headache, but as you can see, time is rather fastidious.”

“Fastidious?”

“She doesn’t like wasting things, and is very fussy about that. I was almost certain that my lease on life had run its course. Heaven knows, I’ve been given more than enough time in this world. But it seems there are more worlds than we think, and this is just another one. Fedorov wanted to know where the missing men were going. Where was Orlov and all the rest? Then he became one of those missing men himself. Yet time takes away, and time gives back as well. She found a place for him, as she just found a place for me when I vanished aboard *Kirov*. You can feel it coming, you know. You tend to feel a bit... insubstantial. For the longest time I thought it was that little treasure I had in my pocket, the key. You know nothing of that, but let’s just say it was a kind of lucky charm. I thought it kept me safe and sound, but now I think it’s just something that helps time go about her business.”

“Director... I’m just not sure I’m following you here.”

“Ah, forgive me if I tend to ramble on. The older you get, the more things you have tucked away up here, and time keeps pouring more tea in my cup. One day it will run over, but for now, I still hold it well enough. Let me put it to you this way. Suppose you were writing a story. You think you have it just the way you want, then you get an idea that simply must be given form and shape in the narrative. So you do a little editing here and there, and write a new chapter. At the end of the day, you save it, overwriting the old file with the new. That’s what time is doing. Well now, you would think your characters would have the good manners to forget the old file—the way things were before you made all those changes and additions to the story—

but it seems they don't, at least in my case. I'm a file that has been saved and replaced a good many times, but I remember each version of the story I lived in before. Yes, each and every one."

"I don't understand.... You are suggesting this is not the year and time we first left Vladivostok?"

"Not at all. Let me see... *Kazan*... yes... You are carrying the P-800 Onyx missile now, am I correct? You have those along with the Kalibr Cruise Missile."

"I gave all those to *Kirov*, but yes, I still have the Onyx."

"Well they will be scratching their heads over that one if I let technicians and missile crews anywhere near your boat. Has it been boarded yet?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Good, good. We'll keep things that way. I will have to arrange the replenishment cycle myself. You see, the *Kazan* of this day and time would be carrying all new missiles. It went missing three weeks ago—in the Atlantic—and we finally get word today that you are back. But if I am not mistaken, you are not the man that took that boat out from Severomorsk when it sailed three weeks ago. You were in the Pacific, yes?"

"Correct. But what do you mean here? You are saying that another man took *Kazan* out from Severomorsk? Impossible. I've had this boat since it was commissioned, and I was in the Pacific. You must be mistaken."

"No, not another man—another Gromyko—another you, Captain, and I am not mistaken. I was at Severomorsk myself to see your boat off, quietly. That may sound impossible, but I was not the man you hob knobbed with aboard *Kazan* on your recent mission. No. I never left Vladivostok with Volsky and Fedorov, even though I now have a clear recollection of all those events. That's what makes this all so difficult. You remember things, but you haven't really lived them through—at least not on the meridian of time you presently occupy. Yes... You remember things you did in another meridian, another world, because after you met your fate there, Time saw fit to make a little deposit. Let me see, she says. What do I do with Kamenski? Ah! I'll put him over here with the other one."

"You're saying there are two of you?"

"In this world? No, just one at a time please. But are there other worlds where I lived and breathed? Of course there are—two, three, a hundred, a thousand, even a million or more. Thankfully, only these few threads have

become entangled in this business, or I would be a true basket case. In fact, I am coming to think that is what clinical madness may be after all, and any number of other mental ailments like schizophrenia—time confusion. I seem to recall about five different versions of myself—all in this one little head. No wonder I am losing my hair, eh? There's just too much going on up here." Again he pointed to his forehead.

"Well now. If the missile men get aboard your boat, they'll start noticing things are different. I'll see to the matter. We've a few new toys in this world. Probably because Putin wasn't assassinated here. He's the one who started pushing the reformation and upgrades in the navy. So we phased out the S-300s, for example, and went to the S-400 and then the S-500. And for the ship killers, there's a new VLS system now, the 3S-14 in eight missile modules. The Zirkon replaced the Onyx, and so that is what you will get."

"Zirkon? I thought that was to be restricted to surface ships."

"Oh? So they were working on it in your meridian as well. Interesting. Technically it was for the surface ships, the 3M22, a hypersonic missile, much faster than the Onyx/Yakhont—twice as fast at Mach 5, but they have a variant for submarines now. If *Kirov* were here, it would get that missile too, 80 of them! Only they've renamed the ship the *Admiral Ushakov* in this go around, and it has brothers. Here we have *Admiral Lazarev*, *Admiral Nakhimov*, and *Pyotr Velikiy*, all in that same class. They were going to build another and call it *Kuznetsov*, but it was cancelled in 1990. Funny thing... I remember a world where we took the best of each one of those four hounds, and rolled them into a shiny new ship we called *Kirov*. Yes, we gave it back its old name, just as it was in the 1980s. That's the ship we have to worry about, the one that went missing—in another world."

Gromyko put a hand to his head, as if rubbing away a headache.

"I know, I know," said Kamenski. "It's a lot to take in all at once like this. Then again, you've sailed the waters of the 1940s, so this should be a good deal easier to swallow. Speaking of that... You're going back. I have another mission for you."

"Another mission?"

"I'm afraid so. You see, that ship that did go missing, *Kirov*, did so in a most interesting way. I never knew how in the beginning, but I do now. It was that nice little control rod, number 25, I believe."

"Yes," said Gromyko. "It's still aboard *Kazan*, but we can't use it. The

Chief Engineer says it's been damaged."

"Worn out," said Kamenski. "Well, don't worry about that. Now that I know where it was made, and how, it will be easy enough to replace. In fact, it has brothers too, other rods that came from the same manufacturing lot. I'll get one for you, and then we can get started."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this," said Gromyko.

"Neither do I," said Kamenski. "It will be very dangerous."

"You mean to say you want me to go back to the 1940s?"

"If we can get there. I'm banking a lot on getting an assist from Mother Time. That's where her problem is just now, and our problem as well. We created this mess, and now we have to clean it up."

"But sir... What about the men? They were looking forward to seeing their families, going home. They thought that would never happen again, and then we finally break through and make it home, or at least that's what they think now."

"Yes I know. It will be very hard on them, but given the state of affairs here, 'home' may not be here for them very much longer. You don't think we can just muddle about in the history without consequences, do you? Not at all! In this case, the muddling about has become quite a bit more. Do you realize that they're all back there, fighting for one side or another in that damn war?"

"They couldn't get home," said Gromyko. "Fedorov said the control rod they were using wasn't reliable. It moved them in both space and time the first time they used it, and he wasn't going to take a risk that the ship might disappear and then end up in the Alps."

"I see... so the second son wasn't reliable, but the risk Fedorov points out pales before the consequences we now face at this end of things. That's the first thing you must communicate to them when you get back there."

"What? Back to that damn war again? What for?"

"To get them out of there, of course. What else? We certainly can't leave them there, not the men, nor their ship."

"You want to try and bring *Kirov* home again? "

"Anywhere but there. World War Two is a vast pane of broken glass. The cracks are everywhere. Push on one and things change—rather dramatically. They change there in the beginning, with the history starting to do things that never happened before. Those events have consequences. Do you realize the

Germans have taken Moscow back there? Burned half the city, and little wonder why. Stalin is long dead and Russia is fragmented into three warring states, one of them led by a renegade ex-naval intelligence officer! You can bet I'm keeping a close eye on him here now, very discretely."

"You mean Ivan Volkov? So I heard, but I was just a little busy in the Atlantic with the Germans, getting some payback."

"*Gneisenau*? For Moscow? Mister Gromyko, we will have to do a damn sight better than that. Let me tell you what's going on now—things I've been carrying up in this stogy old head of mine for some time. In the time line where *Kirov* now resides, the Germans took Moscow, and we just barely stopped them in the winter of 1941. Well, I know how the rest goes soon. We stopped them, but they aren't done with us yet. They're going to strike south now, in the summer offensive of 1942. They want Stalingrad, Volgograd back there, and they want to push right over the Don and Volga to shake hands with Ivan Volkov. He's another problem, and I haven't quite figured out what to do about him just yet beyond keeping him under close surveillance here. For now, however, we'll start with the things we have control over—the men, the ship. We start with *Kirov*."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Go back and get them out," said Kamenski with a smile.

"Director, haven't we tried that once already? Look what happened!"

"Yes, that's a point well taken. Well, we still have to try, because if we don't..." Kamenski stopped, set his pipe down, and rubbed his eyes. "If we don't, Mister Gromyko, then this is all going to unravel, this entire present moment I've called home for so long. It all depends on things that happened in the 1940s. Don't you see? Well, they aren't happening—at least not as they were supposed to. Things are changing, and we're responsible. Never mind about trying to stop the war that is still on our doorstep here. Now it's about something much more. If we don't get back there and put a stop to all this, then everything, and I mean everything, is going to come flying apart. How did that poet put it? Yes... *things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere, the ceremony of innocence is drowned. Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand. The Second Coming!*"

He looked at Gromyko now, and in his eyes there was a profound

sadness, and a vast silence of finality. “That’s what caused it, the second coming of that ship to 1941. It created a loop, and if that doesn’t resolve properly there, if anything should happen to displace that ship to a moment prior to the time of its first arrival, then we face down Paradox yet again. Do this once, and you court a good deal of trouble, just as we experienced it.. Do it twice... Desolation, Mister Gromyko, that is what we are facing now, complete and utter annihilation. The cold frost of infinity is out there, and it’s a savage end, a futile end to the whole damn world. And do you know why? *The second coming*, that’s why. *Kirov* went back, and now it’s gone back a second time. Understand? If that happens again, and again, and again... See what I mean? The changes are already starting to ripple forward in time. We don’t notice them yet, but I can tell. They may seem insignificant—different missiles for your submarine and all. That doesn’t seem all that earth shaking, but I assure you, it is only the beginning.”

“You mean if we don’t get them back here safely...”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean. The whole damn loop will spin out again, and each time it does, the changes become more and more catastrophic. Try getting a future like this one sorted out under those circumstances. Don’t you see? Normally it takes... *time* for the variations to ripple forward to the future. But soon the changes will become so pronounced that they will reach this time, even before events have concluded in the past. That’s Mother Time’s problem now, and it’s also *our* problem. We started it, and so we’ll simply have to finish it.”

“But wait a moment... Didn’t you say this was, well, a different world, a different meridian of time here. Is *Kirov*’s intervention in your history here? Could I read about it in a history book in your library?”

“Very astute,” said Kamenski. “The answer to your last question is no—there is no mention of any of those events in the history of this time line. But that hardly matters. You see, this isn’t the Prime Meridian. It’s just one of many possible alternative Meridians that could arise from events happening in the Prime Meridian. That’s where *Kirov* is now, but the Prime is badly warped, bent out of shape, contaminated by all those missiles, and yes, nuclear bombs as well. It will change things, Mister Gromyko, and rather dramatically. It will change the fate of each and every possible meridian arising from those events—including this one. Understand? *Kirov* sits on the trunk of the tree, this is just one of the branches. But if you cut through that

trunk, they all go down together, don't they. That's what *Kirov* is doing—cutting through the Prime Meridian like a buzz saw. So we have to go back, get them out, and that failing....”

He gave Gromyko those sad empty eyes again.

“We have to kill them,” said the Captain, understanding the darker side of the mission Kamenski was handing him now. “Kill *Kirov*, the ship—there won't be any magic tricks with a control rod this time. That's the only way we can really be certain this loop you speak of could not repeat—kill the ship and crew. That's why you want to load all those nice new missiles onto my boat.”

“Captain, as I said, you are a very astute man.”

Chapter 36

Gromyko had a glum look on his face. He was to be a hired assassin, and worse than that, a wolf in sheep's clothing. "Do you know I fought right alongside *Kirov* with Volsky in the Med?"

"Volsky? He's our one hope. Yes, the Admiral is a very reasonable man; Fedorov as well. They can make a good deal of difference, and so your first option would be to make a delivery."

"What kind of delivery?"

"As I said, those control rods come in batches, and guess what, we still have a perfectly sound Rod-25 here. In this world, there never was a ship christened *Kirov* in 2020. We still have the four brothers, *Ushakov*, *Lazarev*, *Nakhimov*, and *Pyotr Velikiy*, though it looks like only two can walk these days. In this time line, the original *Kirov* had a reactor accident in 1990. Now it's just a rusty pile of radioactive metal. Understand? So in this time line, *Kirov never goes back*. The ship in the past came from another meridian, one with no direct line of causality to this one, which is why we still remain a bit shielded from the consequences I spoke of earlier. In time, however, that will change. This meridian has become entangled."

"What does that mean?"

"Just think of it as two or three threads of time getting all knotted up in a loom. If you don't correct it, you get a real mess, and sooner or later, out come the scissors. The ship caused all this, and it's tearing the history apart, knotting it all up, and time is trying to correct that and stitch it back together—into a new Prime Meridian. And I am one of her darning needles, Mister Gromyko. I don't know why she does me the honor, but that seems to be the case. In this old head, I remember all the events of the other meridians entangled with that fate line, the line where *Kirov* first went back, and so I have what you might call perspective. I'm one of the blind men that was suddenly given the gift of sight, and now I can see the whole elephant, not just his leg or ear or tusk. So Mother Time is using me to try and sort out this mess so she can stitch these errant threads back into one tapestry again—one nice new Prime Meridian. Then that time line will replace all the others... *All* the others Mister Gromyko, including this one."

“But.... I came from the same world *Kirov* came from. Why would my submarine appear here, in this world? Why would I be mixed up in your business?”

“Because that’s the way Time wanted it. She plays a nice little shell game, does she not? One minute you are here, the next minute you are somewhere else. You see, on this meridian, it wasn’t *Kirov* that vanished weeks ago in the Norwegian sea, it was your boat, *Kazan*.”

“Vanished? What happened to it?”

“We don’t know—then again, if I’m to believe your story, you’ve been back in the 1940s. That torpedo you fired gave Mother Time the opportunity to work a little sleight of hand. She brought you here, and for a very good reason, because I am here, a nice little know-it-all to help get you back where you are needed.”

“Me? *Kazan*? Then I have to fix this mess?”

“Something like that. You may get some help, and from most unexpected places, but yes, you have a very important part to play now.”

“But I’m not the man you want. Don’t you need the man and sub that went missing in this time line?”

“A good point, but apparently this is the way she wants to play it now—Mother Time has her reasons.”

“But why? Why me and not the other?”

“That’s a secret She still keeps. It may be that you and your boat *are* that very same submarine and crew, only you simply don’t have the memory of those events poured into your heads as yet. If you start getting hunches, strange snippets of recollection, odd dreams and things, then that will be a very strong clue. Now then... Ours is not to reason why, Captain. Ours is but to do or die.”

“How am I supposed to get back where Time needs me?”

“With Rod-25, of course. I’ve a nice new version just waiting to be tried out.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“What if we both come down with Ebola tomorrow? You ask a lot of questions, Mister Gromyko. Time will tell. We’ll simply put the rod in, run the procedure, and see what happens.”

“But you say there are other threads of time entangled with this one—all knotted up. How can you be sure I’ll get where I’m supposed to go? What if I

end up in some other thread—the wrong thread?”

“That’s not up to me, but something tells me that you will get where your needed. Time will see to that. Ours is simply to understand the imperative before us and offer time your able services—and your remarkable submarine as well.”

Gromyko nodded, his eyes dark, a simmering understanding there now. “Scissors,” he said. “*Kirov* has to be cut out of this tapestry, and I’m to be the scissors.”

“Quite possibly. I know it’s a very difficult thing to ask of you, but considering the consequences if we do nothing....”

“I understand.... Then I’m to go kill *Kirov*?”

“Assuming you can’t get the ship back safely, that will have to be the case. But first, you might simply try persuading them to shift home again.”

“Persuading them? Well I could probably convince Volsky or Fedorov of that, but Karpov is another matter.”

“Yes, he’s a real problem. In fact, he’s been at the root of this entire mess. Let me see... the last I knew, he was in Siberia flying about in airships. Volsky and Fedorov still had the ship, but Karpov will want it back again. That will be very dangerous if it happens, because you are correct, he will not be easily persuaded to attempt to return to the future. But let’s hope for the best. Get back there, wherever Rod-25 sends you, then try to make contact with Volsky or Fedorov. I wish I could tell you more, but you see, in spite of my earlier assertion, I don’t know everything, only those events where I survived in the entangled meridians. Every man’s fate line ends somewhere. In the time line where you are most needed, I... disappeared, and well before the moment of Paradox, before the second coming of that ship. In fact, I believe the entire ship disappeared as well, though I’m speculating on that score. The problem is, I don’t really know what’s been going on there, nor do you. So you’ll have to get back there, get up to speed on events, and then find Volsky and Fedorov. Start with them, and with Dobrynin.”

“Dobrynin?”

“Yes, the Chief Engineer on *Kirov*. He’s quite a talent where the use of that control rod is concerned. Remember Fedorov’s plan? Remember that attempt we made to try and lurk beneath *Kirov* and use the control rod to pull both ships out?”

“Yes—but it didn’t work. That’s what caused the situation we’re facing

now. We got separated. They shifted forward, but only to 1940. I went further, all the way home at first. Yes, I saw what's in store for this world, the end of the war that you're worried about out there. Vladivostok was a black hole—gone. Volsky had warned me about that possibility, and told me I might be the one chance to prevent it. We could see no point in trying to live out our lives there, not in the future we saw. So we tried again, and this time we shifted backwards again, to January 11, 1941 to be exact. We were to send a coded signal to see if *Kirov* was there, and they were, only we later learned they arrived much earlier, in June of 1940.”

“Yes, I know that part well enough. It's all up here.” Kamenski pointed to his head. “So you were both exposed,” he said.

“We arranged to meet the ship off Cape Town. That was when we learned everything was wrong, Russia was divided, the history all a mess.”

“Volkov,” said Kamenski. “I'm afraid I'm to blame for that. I was the one who ordered him to look for Fedorov on the Trans-Siberian rail line. In truth, I was just trying to get rid of the rascal, but way leads on to way. I should always remember that. He caused a great deal of mischief when he got to Ilanskiy. It's a long story. But I think I need to hear the rest of your tale. I'm well aware of what happened after you made your rendezvous with *Kirov*—the fighting in the Med, your little mission to try and close the Dardanelles, the move through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic, and that business with the German Navy. Then what?”

“Then I got quite a shock. We detected an odd sound.”

“A sound?”

“Yes, Chernov had it on his sonar. He's very good, but this one really had him stumped.” He remembered it now, thinking back to that moment when Chernov first made the report.

“Sir, I picked up an odd signal on the ultralow sonic bands. We get message traffic down there, but this could not be anything coming from our world.”

“No,” said Gromyko. “I don't suppose it could. Then what is it?”

“I'm not exactly certain yet, Captain. But it has structure. It's an organized signal—a kind of pulsing wave. It isn't random, and it isn't geothermal or of seismic origin. I was just running recordings through some filters to double check that.”

“Let me hear it.”

“Sir? Oh, that won’t work. The signal is below the threshold of our hearing. You might sense it, on one level, but not with your ears—unless they are very good.”

“Very well, Chernov. Carry on, but don’t forget that the Germans might have U-boats out here too.”

“Don’t worry about that, sir. I’ll hear anything that comes within 50 nautical miles of us—even a diesel boat.”

And then he did hear something, only it wasn’t a German U-boat, but another submarine, a British sub this time, but it certainly wasn’t from the 1940s...

“Con... Undersea contact. Possible submarine...”

“German U-boat?”

“Sir... This sounds like a British sub.”

“British? We were not informed they had anything out here.”

“Sir! This is crazy. It’s reading as Astute Class! We got lucky and recorded one boat after learning its deployment date. It’s the only profile we’ve ever managed to get, but my readings are above a 90% match for this signal.”

“Impossible.”

Gromyko could still hear himself saying that word. Yes, everything he had been about since Volsky first tapped him for an unscheduled mission had been that way—impossible, and now here he was facing that same impossibility yet again. Then a deeper instinct had asserted itself, reptilian, a reflex born of many hours beneath the sea. *“All stop!”* he had shouted. *“Launch noisemaker sled number one. Then right rudder fifteen, down bubble fifteen! Rig for emergency silent running!”*

“Astute class?” said Kamenski. *“Let me see... Astute was the first, of course, then came Ambush, Artful, Audacious, Anson, and Agamemnon. Those boats are all in service here today. They rushed to get Agamemnon ready early, given the political situation we’re facing now. Boat seven won’t join the fleet for at least another year, the Ajax.”*

“Well it must have been one of those first six then. How it got to the 1940s eludes me, but perhaps you could explain it.”

“That isn’t something I witnessed, but if it came from our time, as it had to, then it might have been displaced as a result of the war. The way things are going here, all it will take is a mistake or two so set off a nuke, And when

one goes off, the others are sure to follow.”

“I’m afraid I may have made that same mistake,” said Gromyko. “It was pure instinct, pure reflex. One minute I’m stalking the German Navy, the next I’m under attack by a modern day *Spearfish* torpedo! You don’t sit down with tea to think something like that over. You just react, which is what I did. Given the situation we were facing, I reached for a hammer.”

“I see,” said Kamenski. “A nuclear hammer, I suppose, and here you are. Very interesting. Well Mister Gromyko, we’re going to use another tool in the tool box this time, Rod-25, all new, never used, and at the height of its powers. You’re going back. The last time you used it the poor thing had been through many shifts. It was old, just like I am, and not quite up to the job. Let’s hope we cannot say the same for me now, and that this decision to send you back is a correct one. But a great deal goes with you. Understand?”

“I suppose so,” said Gromyko.

“As soon as I complete the missile bay refit, your boat will be ready. I’ll put my own people on it—very reliable. The new VLS Modules will install seamlessly in your existing bays. You’re getting the Zircons, hypersonic cruise missiles, over five times the speed of sound. Use them if you must, but Captain....” Kamenski paused now, thinking, and then looking like he was trying to remember something. His eyes had a distant look, as though he were seeing something that had not yet come to pass, a vision, a warning, a whisper in his soul that led him to make one further admonition to Gromyko.

“This submarine,” he began. “This *Astute* Class submarine you say you encountered. Should you run across it again, I would do everything possible to let it be.” He wasn’t sure why he said that, but he could feel it, sense it as necessary, as imperative, though he did not know why.

“Leave it be?”

“Yes, no more nuclear torpedoes please. In fact, do everything in your power to avoid such an encounter. It may never happen, but if it does, use all your considerable skills to steer clear of that submarine.”

* * *

Sometime later, Gromyko was back on *Kazan*, and breaking the sad news to his crew that their trial was not yet over. “Yes, I know this will hurt. We’ve been longing for home, for our families, our loved ones, but so have

our brothers aboard *Kirov*, yes? They've been out there a hell of a lot longer than we have. We tried to get them home again, but we failed the first time. We sailed with them, fought with them, and now we will not abandon them in their hour of need. We have new orders, and that is why we signed on, so we will carry them out. And then, perhaps one day, we will come home again, only to a world that we might yet be able to live in, and not the one we saw the first time we tried. Yes, we thought this might be that world, but not yet... not yet..."

He let that settle in, let the men take it all to heart, a good crew, a fighting crew, and there was a war waiting for them, one way or another. He did not have the heart at that time to tell them everything, that they may have to make that war with the very ship and crew they were now going back to find and rescue from the cold grip of time. That would come later...

"Chernov," he said when the boat was finally rearmed and getting ready to get underway. "Did you ever refine your contact data on the British boat we tangled with?"

"You mean the Astute Class boat? Yes sir, I've worked on that a good deal, and I found some other data we had on file from a trawler we had listening one day. I can't be sure sir, but the Intel that I've been able to gather would lead me to make a pretty good guess as to which boat it was."

"Well?" Gromyko liked answers, not questions.

"The *Ambush*, sir. The second boat in the class. I'll put my money on number two."

"*Ambush*," said Gromyko. "Good name for that one." He smiled, and Chernov knew what he meant.

So here we go again, he thought. We're a nice angry wolf, and with sharp new teeth... a wolf in sheep's clothing.

The Saga Continues...

Season Four concludes the battles in the West as the allies drive on Gibraltar, while Eric Manstein leads a dangerous new German offensive in the East. The war then continues into 1943, even while Fedorov conducts a desperate mission to avoid what he sees is the calamity of yet another paradox. It all begins July 1st with the season premier in a title to be announced in the weeks ahead.

In the meantime, look for the next *Kirov Series* battle book to feature all the great battle action from the East Front in one continuous and uninterrupted narrative.

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 reaching the end of Season 3, as the Allies launch their first offensive in the West—*Second Front*.

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.

You can enter the series at any point of interest by reading the novel that immediately precedes your desired entry point, as it also acts as a prelude to events beginning each season. Information on the battles covered in each book is available at www.writingshop.ws.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

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

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

- 9) *Altered States*
- 10) *Darkest Hour*
- 11) *Hinge Of Fate*
- 12) *Three Kings*
- 13) *Grand Alliance*
- 14) *Hammer of God*
- 15) *Crescendo of Doom*
- 16) *Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

- 17) *Doppelganger*
- 18) *Nemesis*
- 19) *Winter Storm*
- 20) *Tide of Fortune*
- 21) *Knight's Move*
- 22) *Turning Point*
- 23) *Steel Reign*
- 24) *Second Front – Season 3 Finale*

And yes, there will be a season 4 as the war moves into 1943

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